Gunston Classics

PENNY PARKER MYSTERY STORIES

DANGER at the DRAWBRIDGE

by MILDRED A. WIRT

Book No. 3

DANGER AT THE DRAWBRIDGE

Penny Parker Mystery Stories

by

Mildred A. WirtCONTENT

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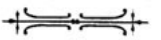


CONTENT

1 AN ASSIGNMENT FOR PENNY

2 REPORTERS NOT WANTED 9

3 GIFT TO THE BRIDE 1

4 BEHIND THE BUSHES 2

5 THE MISSING BRIDEGROOM 3

6 A RING OF WHITE GOLD 4

7 THE FORBIDDEN POOL

8 PARENTAL PROTEST

9ASOCIETYBAZAAR

10ATHROWNSTONE

11 QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

12 FISHERMAN'S LUCK

13TWOMENANDABOAT

14 THE STONE TOWER

15 A CAMEO PIN

16 GATHERING CLUES

17 A SEARCH FOR JERRY

18 OVER THE DRAWBRIDGE

19 A DARING RESCUE

20 AN IMPORTANT INTERVIEW

21 THE WHITE CRUISER

22 TRAPPED IN THE CABIN

23 AT THE HIDE-OUT

24 SECRET OF THE LILY POOL

25 VICTORY FOR PENNY

The speeding automobile careened down the bank.

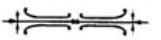
CHAPTER 1
AN ASSIGNMENT FOR PENNY

Penny Parker, leaning indolently against the edge of the kitchen table, watched Mrs. Weems stem strawberries into a bright green bowl.

"Tempting bait for Dad's jaded appetite," she remarked, helping herself to the largest berry in the dish. "If he can't eat them, I can."

"I do wish you'd leave those berries alone," the housekeeper protested in an exasperated tone. "They haven't been washed yet."

"Oh, I don't mind a few germs," laughed Penny. "I just toss them off like a duck shedding water. Shall I take the breakfast tray up to Dad?"



“Yes, I wish you would, Penny,” sighed Mrs. Weems. “I’m right tired on my feet this morning. Hot weather always did wear me down.”

She washed the berries and then offered the tray of food to Penny who started with it toward the kitchen vestibule.

“Now where are you going, Penelope Parker?” Mrs. Weems demanded suspiciously.

“Oh, just to the automatic lift.” Penny’s blue eyes were round with innocence.

“Don’t you dare try to ride in that contraption again!” scolded the housekeeper. “It was never built to carry human freight.”

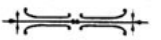
“I’m not exactly freight,” Penny said with an injured sniff. “It’s strong enough to carry me. I know because I tried it last week.”

“You walk up the stairs like a lady or I’ll take the tray myself,” Mrs. Weems threatened. “I declare, I don’t know when you’ll grow up.”

“Oh, all right,” grumbled Penny good-naturedly. “But I do maintain it’s a shameful waste of energy.”

Balancing the tray precariously on the palm of her hand she tripped lightly up the stairway and tapped on the door of her father’s bedroom.

“Come in,” he called in a muffled voice.



Anthony Parker, editor and owner of the Riverview Star sat propped up with pillows, reading a day-old edition of the newspaper.

"'Morning, Dad," said Penny cheerfully. "How is our invalid today?"

"I'm no more an invalid than you are," returned Mr. Parker testily. "If that old quack, Doctor Horn, doesn't let me out of bed today—"

"You'll simply explode, won't you, Dad?" Penny finished mischievously. "Here, drink your coffee and you'll feel less like a stick of dynamite."

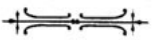
Mr. Parker tossed the newspaper aside and made a place on his knees for the breakfast tray.

"Did I hear an argument between you and Mrs. Weems?" he asked curiously.

"No argument, Dad. I just wanted to ride up in style on the lift. Mrs. Weems thought it wasn't a civilized way to travel."

"I should think not." The corners of Mr. Parker's mouth twitched slightly as he poured coffee from the silver pot. "That lift was built to carry breakfast trays, but not in combination with athletic young ladies."

"What a bore, this business of growing up," sighed Penny. "You can't be natural at all."



“You seem to manage rather well with all the restrictions,” her father remarked dryly.

Penny twisted her neck to gaze at her reflection in the dresser mirror beyond the footboard of the big mahogany bed.

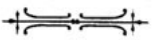
“I won’t mind growing up if only I’m able to develop plenty of glamour,” she said speculatively. “Am I getting any better looking, Dad?”

“Not that I’ve noticed,” replied Mr. Parker gruffly, but his gaze lingered affectionately upon his daughter’s golden hair. She really was growing prettier each day and looked more like her mother who had died when Penny was a little girl. He had spoiled her, of course, for she was an only child, but he was proud because he had taught her to think straight. She was deeply loyal and affectionate and those who loved her overlooked her casual ways and flippant speech.

“What happened to the paper boy this morning?” Mr. Parker asked between bites of buttered toast.

“It isn’t time for him yet, Dad,” said Penny demurely. “You always expect him at least an hour early.”

“First edition’s been off the press a good half hour,” grumbled the newspaper owner. “When I get back to the Star office, I’ll see that deliveries are speeded up. Just wait until I talk with Roberts!”



“Haven’t you been doing a pretty strenuous job of running the paper right from your bed?” inquired Penny as she refilled her father’s cup. “Sometimes when you talk with that poor circulation manager I think the telephone wires will burn off.”

“So I’m a tyrant, am I?”

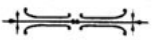
“Oh, everyone knows your bark is worse than your bite, Dad. But you’ve certainly not been at your best the last few days.”

Mr. Parker’s eyes roved about the luxuriously furnished bedroom. Tinted walls, chintz draperies, the rich, deep rug, were completely lost upon him. “This place is a prison,” he grumbled.

For nearly a week the household had been thrown completely out of its usual routine by the editor’s illness. Overwork combined with an attack of influenza had sent him to bed, there to remain until he should be released by a doctor’s order. With a telephone at his elbow, Mr. Parker had kept in close touch with the staff of the Riverview Star but he fretted at confinement.

“I can’t half look after things,” he complained. “And now Miss Hilderman, the society editor, is sick. I don’t know how we’ll get a good story on the Kippenberg wedding.”

Penny looked up quickly. “Miss Hilderman is ill?”



“Yes, DeWitt, the city editor, telephoned me a few minutes ago. She wasn’t able to show up for work this morning.”

“I really don’t see why he should bother you about that, Dad. Can’t Miss Hilderman’s assistant take over the duties?”

“The routine work, yes, but I don’t care to trust her with the Kippenberg story.”

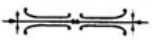
“Is it something extra special, Dad?”

“Surely, you’ve heard of Mrs. Clayton Kippenberg?”
“The name is familiar but I can’t seem to recall—”

“Clayton Kippenberg made a mint of money in the chain drug business. No one ever knew exactly the extent of his fortune. He built an elaborate estate about a hundred and twenty-five miles from here, familiarly called The Castle because of its resemblance to an ancient feudal castle. The estate is cut off from the mainland on three sides and may be reached either by boat or by means of a picturesque drawbridge.”

“Sounds interesting,” commented Penny.

“I never saw the place myself. In fact, Kippenberg never allowed outsiders to visit the estate. Less than a year ago a rumor floated around that he had separated from his wife. There also was considerable talk that he had disappeared because of difficulties with the government over income tax



evasion and wished to escape arrest. At any rate, he faded out of the picture while his wife remained in possession of The Castle."

"And now she is marrying again?"

"No, it is Mrs. Kippenberg's daughter, Sylvia, who is to be married. The bridegroom, Grant Atherwald, comes from a very old and distinguished family."

"I don't see why the story should be so difficult to cover."

"Mrs. Kippenberg has ruled that no reporters or photographers will be allowed on the estate," explained Mr. Parker.

"That does complicate the situation."

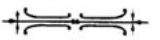
"Yes, it may not be easy to persuade Mrs. Kippenberg to change her mind. I rather doubt that our assistant society editor has the ingenuity to handle the story."

"Then why don't you send one of the regular reporters? Jerry Livingston, for instance?"

"Jerry couldn't tell a tulle wedding veil from one of crinoline. Nor could any other man on the staff."

"I could get that story for you," Penny said suddenly. "Why don't you try me?"

Mr. Parker gazed at his daughter speculatively. "Do you really think you could?"



"Of course." Penny spoke with assurance. "Didn't I bring in two perfectly good scoops for your old sheet?"

"You certainly did. Your Vanishing Houseboat yarn was one of the best stories we've published in a year of Sundays. And the town is still talking about Tale of the Witch Doll."

"After what I went through to get those stories, a mere wedding would be child's play."

"Don't be too confident," warned Mr. Parker. "If Mrs. Kippenberg doesn't alter her decision about reporters, the story may be impossible to get."

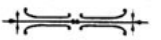
"May I try?" Penny asked eagerly.

Mr. Parker frowned. "Well, I don't know. I hate to send you so far, and then I have a feeling—"

"Yes, Dad?"

"I can't put my thoughts into words. It's just that my newspaper instinct tells me this story may develop into something big. Kippenberg's disappearance never was fully explained and his wife refused to discuss the affair with reporters."

"Kippenberg might be at the wedding," said Penny, thinking aloud. "If he were a normal father he would wish to see his daughter married."



“You follow my line of thought, Penny. When you’re at the estate—if you get in—keep your eyes and ears open.”

“Then you’ll let me cover the story?” Penny cried in delight.

“Yes, I’ll telephone the office now and arrange for a photographer to go with you.”

“Tell them to send Salt Sommers,” Penny suggested quickly. “He doesn’t act as know-it-all as some of the other lads.”

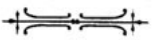
“I had Sommers in mind,” her father nodded as he reached for the telephone.

“And I have a lot more than Salt Sommers in my mind,” laughed Penny.

“Meaning?”

“Another big story, Dad! A scoop for the Star and this for you.”

Penny implanted a kiss on her father’s cheek and skipped joyously from the room.



CHAPTER 2

REPORTERS NOT WANTED

In the editorial room of the Riverview Star heads turned and eyebrows lifted as Penny, decked in her best silk dress and white picture hat, clicked her high-heeled slippers across the bare floor. Jerry Livingston, reporter, stopped pecking at his typewriter and stared in undisguised admiration.

"Well, if it isn't our Bright Penny," he bantered. "Didn't recognize you for a minute in all those glad rags."

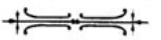
"These are my work clothes," replied Penny. "I'm covering the Kippenberg wedding."

Jerry pushed his hat farther back on his head and grinned.

"Tough assignment. From what I hear of the Kippenberg family, you'll be lucky if they don't throw the wedding cake at you."

Penny laughed and went on, winding her way through a barricade of desks to the office of the society editor. Miss Arnold, the assistant, was talking over the telephone, but in a moment she finished and turned to face the girl.

"Good morning, Miss Parker," she said stiffly. An edge to her voice told Penny more clearly than words that the young woman was nettled because she had not been trusted with the story.



“Good morning,” replied Penny politely. “Dad said you would be able to give me helpful suggestions about covering the Kippenberg wedding.”

“There’s not much I can tell you, really. The ceremony is to take place at two o’clock in the garden, so you’ll have ample time to reach the estate. If you get in—” Miss Arnold placed an unpleasant emphasis upon the words —“take notes on Miss Kippenberg’s gown, the flowers, the decorations, the names of her attendants. Try to keep your facts straight. Nothing infuriates a bride more than to read in the paper that she carried a bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley and roses while actually it was a bouquet of some other flower.”

“I’ll try not to infuriate Miss Kippenberg,” promised Penny.

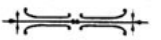
Miss Arnold glanced quickly at her but the girl’s face was perfectly serene.

“That’s all I can tell you, Miss Parker,” she said shortly.

“Bring in at least a column. For some reason the city editor rates the wedding an important story.”

“I’ll do my best,” responded Penny, and arose.

Salt Sommers was waiting for her when she came out of the office. He was a tall, spare young man, with a deep scar down his left cheek. He talked nearly as fast as he walked.



“If you’re all set, let’s go,” he said.

Penny found herself three paces behind but she caught up with the photographer as he waited for the elevator.

“I’m taking Minny along,” Salt volunteered, holding his finger steadily on the signal bell. “May come in handy.”

“Minny?” asked Penny, puzzled.

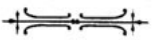
“Miniature camera. You can’t always use the Model X.”

“Oh,” murmured Penny. Deeply embarrassed, she remained silent as the elevator shot them down to the ground floor.

Salt loaded his photographic equipment into a battered press car which was parked near the loading dock at the rear of the building. He slid in behind the wheel and then as an afterthought swung open the car door for Penny.

Salt seemed to know the way to the Kippenberg estate. They shot through Riverview traffic, shaving red lights and tooting derisively at slow drivers. In open country he pressed the accelerator down to the floor and the car roared down the road, only slackening speed as it raced through a town.

“How do you travel when you’re in a hurry?” Penny gasped, clinging to her flopping hat.



Salt grinned and lifted his foot from the gasoline pedal.

"Sorry," he said. "I get in the habit of driving fast. We have plenty of time."

As they rode, Penny gathered scraps of information. The Kippenberg estate was located six miles from the town of Corbin and was cut off from the mainland on three sides by the joining of two wide rivers, one with a direct outlet to the ocean. Salt did not know when the house had been built but it was considered one of the show places of the locality.

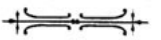
"Do you think we'll have much trouble getting our story?" Penny asked anxiously.

"All depends," Salt answered briefly. He slammed on the brake so suddenly that Penny was flung forward in the seat.

Another car coming from the opposite direction had pulled up at the side of the road. Penny did not recognize the three men who were crowded into the front seat, but the printed placard, Ledger which was pasted on the windshield told her they represented a rival newspaper in Riverview.

"What luck, Les?" Salt called, craning his neck out the car window.

"You may as well turn around and go back," came the disgusted reply. "The old lady won't let a



reporter or a photographer on the estate. She has a guard stationed on the drawbridge to see that you don't get past."

The car drove on toward Riverview. Salt sat staring down the road, drumming his fingers thoughtfully on the steering wheel.

"Looks like we're up against a tough assignment," he said. "If Les can't get in—"

"I'm not going back without at least an attempt," announced Penny firmly.

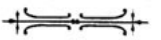
"That's the spirit!" Salt cried with sudden approval. "We'll get on the estate somehow if we have to swim over."

He jerked the press card from the windshield, and reaching into the back seat of the car, covered the Model X camera with an old gunny sack. The miniature camera he placed in his coat pocket.

"No use advertising our profession too early in the game," he remarked.

Twelve-thirty found Penny and Salt in the sleepy little town of Corbin. Fortifying themselves with a lunch of hot dog sandwiches and pop, they followed a winding, dusty highway toward the Kippenberg estate.

Presently, through the trees, marking the end of the road, an iron drawbridge loomed up. It stood in open position so that boats might pass on the river



below. A wooden barrier had been erected across the front of the structure which bore a large painted sign. Penny read the words aloud.

"'DANGEROUS DRAWBRIDGE—KEEP OFF.'"

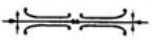
Salt drew up at the side of the road. "Looks as if this is as far as we're going," he said in disgust. "There's no other road to the estate. I'll bet that 'dangerous drawbridge' business is just a dodge to keep undesirables away from the place until after the wedding."

Penny nodded gloomily. Then she brightened as she noticed an old man who obviously was an estate guard standing at the entrance to the bridge. He stared toward the old car as if trying to ascertain whether or not the occupants were expected guests.

"I'm going over to talk with him," Penny said.

"Pretend that you're a guest," suggested Salt. "You look the part in that fancy outfit of yours."

Penny walked leisurely toward the drawbridge. Appraisingly, she studied the old man who leaned comfortably against the gearhouse. A dilapidated hat pulled low over his shaggy brows seemed in keeping with the rest of his wardrobe—a blue work shirt and a pair of grease-smudged overalls. A charred corn-cob pipe, thrust at an angle between his lips, provided sure protection against the mosquitoes swarming up from the river below.



“Good afternoon,” began Penny pleasantly. “My friend and I are looking for the Kippenberg estate. We were told at Corbin to take this road but we seem to have made a mistake.”

“You ain’t made no mistake, Miss,” the old man replied. “Then is the estate across the river?”

“That’s right, Miss.”

“But how are guests to reach the place? I see the sign says the bridge is out of commission. Are we supposed to swim over?”

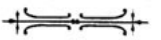
“Not if you don’t want to,” the old man answered evenly. “Mrs. Kippenberg has a launch that takes the folks back and forth. It’s on the other side now but will be back in no time at all.”

“I’ll wait in the car out of the hot sun,” Penny said. She started away, then paused to inquire casually: “Is this drawbridge really out of order?”

The old man was deliberate in his reply. He blew a ring of smoke into the air, watched it hover like a floating skein of wool and finally disintegrate as if plucked to pieces by an unseen hand.

“Well, yes, and no,” he said. “It ain’t exactly sick but she sure is ailin’. I wouldn’t trust no heavy contraption on this bridge.”

“Condemned by the state, I suppose?”



“No, Miss, and I’ll tell you why. This here bridge doesn’t belong to the state. It’s a private bridge on a private road.”

“Odd that Mrs. Kippenberg never had it repaired,” Penny remarked. “It must be annoying.”

“It is to all them that don’t like launches. As for Mrs. Kippenberg, she don’t mind. Fact is, she ain’t much afraid of the bridge. She drives her car across whenever she takes the notion.”

“Then the bridge does operate!” Penny exclaimed.

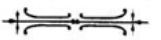
“Sure it does. That’s my job, to raise and lower it whenever the owner says the word. But the bridge ain’t fit for delivery trucks and such-like. One of them big babies would crack through like goin’ over sponge ice.”

“Well, I rather envy your employer,” said Penny lightly.

“It isn’t every lady who has her own private drawbridge.”

“She is kind of exclusive-like that way, Miss. Mrs. Kippenberg she keeps the drawbridge up so she’ll have more privacy. And I ain’t blamin’ her. These here newspaper reporters always is a-pesterin’ the life out of her.”

Penny nodded sympathetically and walked back to make her report to Salt.



“No luck?” he demanded.

“Guess twice,” she laughed. “The old bridgeman just took it for granted I was one of the wedding guests. It will be all right for us to go over in the guest launch as soon as it arrives.”

Salt gazed ruefully at his clothes.

“I don’t look much like a guest. Think I’ll pass inspection?”

“Maybe you could get by as one of the poor relations,” grinned Penny. “Pull your hat down and straighten your tie.”

Salt shook his head. “A business suit with a grease spot on the vest isn’t the correct dress for a formal wedding. You might get by but I won’t.”

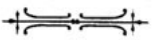
“Then should I try it alone?”

“I’ll have to get those pictures somehow,” stated Salt grimly.

“Maybe we could hire a boat of our own,” Penny suggested. “Of course it wouldn’t look as well as if we arrived on the guest launch.”

“Let’s see what we can line up,” Salt said, swinging open the car door.

They walked to the river’s edge and looked in both directions. There were no small boats to be seen. The only available craft was a large motor boat



which came slowly downstream toward the open drawbridge. Penny caught a glimpse of the pilot, a burly man with a red, puffy face.

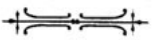
Salt slid down the bank toward the water's edge, and hailed the boat.

"Hey, you, Cap'n!" he called. "Two bucks to take me across the river."

The man inclined his head, looked steadily at Salt for an instant, then deliberately turned his back.

"Five!" shouted Salt.

The pilot gave no sign that he had heard. Instead, he speeded up the boat which passed beneath the drawbridge and went on down the river.



CHAPTER 3

GIFT TO THE BRIDE

"Perhaps he didn't hear you," said Penny, peering after the retreating boat.

"He heard me all right," growled Salt as he scrambled back up the high bank.

Noticing a small boy in dirty overalls who sat at the water's edge fishing, he called to him: "Say, sonny, who was that fellow, do you know?"

"Nope," answered the boy, barely turning his head, "but his boat has been going up and down the river all morning. That's why I can't catch anything."

The boat rounded a bend of the river and was lost to view. Only one other craft appeared on the water, a freshly painted white motor launch which could be seen coming from the far shore.

"That must be the guest boat now," remarked Penny, shading her eyes against the glare of the sun. "It seems to be our only hope."

"Let's try to get aboard and see what happens," proposed the photographer.

They walked leisurely back toward the guard at the drawbridge, timing their arrival just as the launch swung up to the landing. With a cool assurance which Penny tried to duplicate, Salt stepped

aboard, nodded indifferently to the wheelsman, and slumped down in one of the leather seats.

Penny waited uneasily for embarrassing questions which did not come. Gradually she relaxed as the boatman took no interest in them and the guard's attention was fully occupied with other cars which had driven up to the drawbridge.

A few minutes later, two elderly women, both elegantly gowned, were helped aboard the boat by their chauffeur. One of the women stared disapprovingly at Salt through her lorgnette and then ignored him.

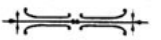
"We'll get by all right," Salt whispered confidently.

"Wait until Mrs. Kippenberg sees us," warned Penny.

"Oh, we'll keep out of her way until we have our story and plenty of pictures. Once we're across the river it will be easy."

"I hope you're right," muttered Penny.

While Salt's task of taking pictures might prove relatively simple, she realized that her own work would be anything but easy. She could not hope to gather many facts without talking to a member of the family, and the instant she admitted her identity she likely would be ejected from the grounds.



“I boasted I’d bring in a front page story,” she thought ruefully. “I’ll be lucky if I get a column of routine stuff.”

The boat was moving slowly away from the landing when the guard at the drawbridge called in a loud voice: “Hold it, Joe!”

Penny and Salt stiffened in their chairs, fearing they were to be exposed. But they were both greatly relieved to see that a long, black limousine had drawn up at the end of the road. The launch had been stopped so that additional passengers might be accommodated.

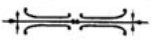
Salt nudged Penny’s elbow.

“Grant Atherwald,” he contributed, jerking his head toward a tall, well-built young man who had stepped from the car. “I’ve seen his picture plenty of times.”

“The bridegroom?” Penny turned to stare.

“Sure. He’s one of the blue-bloods, but they say he’s a little short on ready cash.”

The young man, dressed immaculately in formal day attire, and accompanied by two other men, came aboard the launch. He bowed politely to the elderly women and his gaze fell questioningly upon Penny and Salt. But if he wondered why they were there, he did not voice his thought.



As the boat put out across the river Penny watched Grant Atherwald curiously. It seemed to her that he appeared nervous and preoccupied. He stared straight before him, clenching and unclenching his hands. His face was colorless and drawn.

“He’s nervous and worried,” thought Penny. “I guess all bridegrooms are like that.”

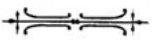
A sharp “click” sounded in her ear. Penny did not turn toward Salt, but she caught her breath, knowing what he had done. He had dared to take a picture of Grant Atherwald!

She waited, feeling certain that the sound must have been heard by everyone in the boat. A full minute elapsed and no one spoke. When Penny finally glanced at Salt he was gazing serenely out across the muddy water, his miniature camera shielded behind a felt hat which he held on his knees.

The boat docked. Salt and Penny allowed the others to go ashore first, and then followed a narrow walk which wound through a deep lane of evergreen trees.

“Salt,” Penny asked abruptly, “how did you get that picture of Atherwald?”

“Snapped it through a hole in the crown of my hat. It’s an old trick. I always wear this special hat when I’m sent out on a hard assignment.”



“I thought a cannon had gone off when the shutter clicked,” Penny laughed. “We were lucky you weren’t caught.”

Emerging from behind the trees, they obtained their first view of the Kippenberg house. Sturdily built of brick and stone, it stood upon a slight hill, its many turrets and towers commanding a view of the two rivers.

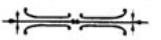
“Nice layout,” Salt commented, pausing to snap a second picture. “Wish someone would give me a castle for a playhouse.”

They crossed the moat and found themselves directly behind Grant Atherwald again. Before the bridegroom could enter the house a servant stepped forward and handed him a sealed envelope.

“I was told to give this to you as soon as you arrived, sir,” he said.

Grant Atherwald nodded, and taking the letter, quickly opened it. A troubled expression came over his face as he scanned the message. Without a word he thrust the paper into his pocket. Turning, he walked swiftly toward the garden.

“Salt, did you notice how queerly Atherwald looked —” Penny began, but the photographer interrupted her.



“Listen,” he said, “we haven’t a Chinaman’s chance of getting in the front door. That boy in the fancy knickers is giving everyone the once over. Let’s try a side entrance.”

Without attracting attention they walked quickly around the house and located a door where no servant had been posted. Entering, they passed through a marble- floored vestibule into a breakfast room crowded with serving tables. Salt nonchalantly helped himself to an olive from one of the large glass dishes and led Penny on toward the main hall where many of the guests had gathered to admire the wedding gifts.

“Now don’t swipe any of the silver,” Salt said jokingly. “I think that fellow over by the stairway is a private detective.”

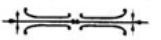
“He seems to be looking at us with a suspicious gleam in his eyes,” Penny replied. “I hope we don’t get tossed out of here.”

“We’ll be all right if Mrs. Kippenberg doesn’t see us before the ceremony.”

“Do you suppose Mr. Kippenberg could be here, Salt?”

“Not likely. It’s my guess that fellow will never be seen again.”

“Dad doesn’t share your opinion.”



“I know,” Salt admitted. “We’ll keep watch for him, but it would just be a lucky break if it turns out he’s here.”

Mingling with the guests, they walked slowly about a long table where the wedding gifts were displayed. Penny gazed curiously at dishes of solid silver, crystal bowls, candlesticks, jade ornaments, tea sets and service plates encrusted with gold.

“Nothing trashy here,” muttered Salt.

“I’ve never seen such an elegant display,” Penny whispered in awe. “Do you suppose that picture is one of the gifts?”

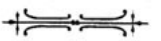
She indicated an oil painting which stood on an easel not far from the table. So many guests had gathered about the picture that she could not see it distinctly. But at her elbow, a woman in rustling silk, said to a companion:

“My dear, a genuine Van Gogh! It must have cost a small fortune!”

When the couple had moved aside, Penny and Salt drew closer to the easel. One glance assured them that the painting had been executed by a master. However, it was the subject of the picture which gave Penny a distinct start.

“Will you look at that!” she whispered to Salt.

“What about it?” he asked carelessly.



“Don’t you notice anything significant?”

“Can’t say I do. It’s just a nice picture of a drawbridge.”

“That’s just the point, Salt!” Penny’s eyes danced with excitement. “A drawbridge!”

The photographer glanced again at the painting, this time with deeper interest.

“Say, it looks a lot like the bridge which was built over the river,” he observed. “You think this picture is a copy of it?”

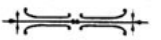
Penny shook her head impatiently. “Salt, your knowledge of art is dreadful. This Van Gogh was painted ages ago and is priceless. Don’t you see, the drawbridge has to be a copy of the picture?”

“Your theory sounds reasonable,” Salt admitted. “I wonder who gave the painting to the bride? There’s no name attached.”

“Can’t you guess why?”

“I never was good at kid games.”

“Why, it’s clear as crystal,” Penny declared, keeping her voice low. “This estate with the drawbridge was built by Clayton Kippenberg. He must have been familiar with the Van Gogh painting, and had the real bridge modeled after the picture. For that matter, the painting may have been in his possession—”



“Then you think the picture was presented to Sylvia Kippenberg by her father?” Salt broke in quickly.

“Yes, I do. Only a person very close to the bride would have given such a gift.”

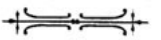
“H-m,” said Salt, squinting at the picture thoughtfully. “If you’re right it means that Clayton Kippenberg’s whereabouts must be known to his family. His disappearance may not be such a deep mystery to Mamma Kippenberg and daughter Sylvia.”

“Oh, Salt, wouldn’t it make a grand story if only we could learn what became of him?”

“Sure. Front page stuff.”

“We simply must get the story somehow! If Mrs. Kippenberg would just answer our questions about this drawbridge painting—”

“I’m afraid Mamma Kippenberg isn’t going to break down and tell all,” Salt said dryly. “But buckle on your steel armor, little girl, because here she comes now!”



CHAPTER 4

BEHIND THE BUSHES

A large, middle-aged woman in rose-colored silk, crossed the room directly toward Salt and Penny. Her pale blue eyes glinted with anger and there were hard lines about her mouth. She walked haughtily, but with grim purpose.

"Unless we do some fast talking, out we go!" muttered Salt. "It's Mrs. Kippenberg, all right."

They stood their ground, knowing they had been recognized as intruders. But before the woman could reach them she was stopped by a servant who spoke a few words in a low tone. For a moment Mrs. Kippenberg forgot about Penny and Salt as a new problem presented itself.

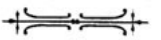
"I can't talk with anyone now," she said in an agitated voice. "Tell them to come back later."

"They insist upon talking with you now, Madam," replied the servant. "Unless you see them they say they will look around for themselves."

"Oh!" Mrs. Kippenberg drew herself up sharply as if from a physical blow. "Where are they now?"

"In the library, Madam."

Penny did not hear the woman's reply, but she turned and followed the servant.



“Saved by the bell,” mumbled Salt. “Now let’s get away from here before she comes back.”

They pushed through the throng and reached a long hallway. Mrs. Kippenberg had disappeared, but as they drew near an open door they caught sight of her again. She stood just inside the library, her back toward them, talking with two men who wore plain gray business suits.

Penny half drew back, fearing discovery, but Salt pulled her along. As they went quietly past the door they heard Mrs. Kippenberg say in an excited voice:

“No, no, I tell you he isn’t here! Why should I try to deceive you? We have nothing to hide. You are most inconsiderate to annoy me at such a time!”

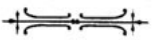
Penny and Salt did not hear the reply. They reached an outside door and stepped down on a flagstone terrace which overlooked the garden at the rear of the grounds.

“Who were those men, do you suppose?” Penny whispered, fearful that her voice might betray them.

“Officers of the law, I should guess,” Salt replied in an undertone.

“Government men?”

“Likely as not. I don’t believe the locals would bother her. Anyway she’s got the wind up and you



can tell she's scared silly in spite of all her back talk."

"You know what I think they're after?" Penny said thoughtfully.

"Well, if I had just one guess," Salt replied, "I'd say they are after Mr. Kippenberg."

"I agree with you there."

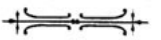
"Sure, why else would they come sleuthing around at a time like this? The answer is simple. Daughter gets married. Papa wants to see his darling do it. Therefore, boys, we'll spread a net for Daddy and he might plump right into it."

"So that's the way a G man's mind works?" laughed Penny.

"But I would take it that Kippenberg is no fool," Salt went on. "If they really have a 'man wanted' sign hung on him he would be too cagey to come around here today."

They were standing beside the stone balustrade which bounded the terrace. Below them the green foliage of the gardens formed a dark background for the playing fountains. A cool breeze drifted in from the river and rattled a window awning just over their heads.

"We're in an exposed place here," observed Salt uneasily. "Maybe we ought to find a hole somewhere."



"We'll never learn anything in a hole," Penny objected. "In fact, we're not making much progress in running down any sort of story. I do wish we could have heard more of that conversation."

"And get thrown out on our collective ear before we even have a chance to snap a picture of the blushing bride!"

"Pictures! Pictures!" exclaimed Penny. "That's all you photographers think about. How about poor little me and my story? After all, you can't bring out a paper full of nothing but pictures and cigarette ads. You need a little news to go with it."

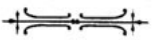
"You like to work too fast," complained Salt. "Right now the thing to do is to keep out of sight. I'm telling you the minute Mrs. Kippy finishes with those men she'll be gunning for us."

"Then I suppose we'll have to go into hiding."

"First, let's mosey out into the rose garden," Salt proposed. "I'll take a few shots and then we'll duck under somewhere and wait until the ceremony starts."

"That's all very well for you," grumbled Penny, "but I can't write much of a story without talking to some member of the family."

Salt started off across the velvety green lawn toward the rose arbor where the service was to be held. Penny followed reluctantly. She watched the



photographer take several pictures before a servant approached him.

“I beg your pardon,” the man said coldly, “but Mrs. Kippenberg gave orders no pictures were to be taken. If you are from one of the papers—”

“Oh, I saw her in the house just a minute ago,” Salt replied carelessly.

“Sorry, sir,” the servant apologized, retreating.

Salt finished taking the pictures and slipped the miniature camera back into his pocket.

“Now let’s amble down toward the river and wait,” he said to Penny. “We’ll blossom forth just as the ceremony starts. Mrs. Kippy won’t dare interrupt it to have us thrown off the grounds.”

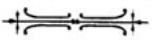
They walked down a sloping path, past a glass-enclosed hothouse and on toward a grove of giant oak and maple trees.

“It’s pleasant here when you’re away from the crowd,” Penny remarked, gazing up at the leafy canopy. “I wonder where this path leads?”

“Oh, down to the river probably. With water on three sides of us that’s a fairly safe guess.”

“Which rivers flow past the estate, Salt?”

“The Big Bear and the Kobalt.”



“The same old muddy Kobalt which is near our town,” said Penny in surprise. “I’ll always think of it as a river of adventure.”

“Because of Mud-Cat Joe and his Vanishing Houseboat?”

Penny nodded and a dreamy look came into her eyes. “So much happened on the Kobalt, Salt. Remember that big party Dad threw at the Comstock Inn?”

“Do I? Jerry Livingston decided to sleep in Room Seven where so many persons had disappeared.”

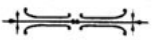
“And then he was spirited away almost before our very eyes,” added Penny. “Days later Mud-Cat Joe helped me fish him out of this same old Kobalt. For awhile we didn’t think he’d ever pull through or be able to tell what had happened to him.”

“But as the grand finale you and your friend, Louise Sidell, solved the mystery and secured a dandy story for the Star. Those were the days!”

“You talk as if they were gone forever,” laughed Penny.

“Other good stories will come along.”

“Maybe,” said Salt, “but covering a wedding is pretty tame in comparison.”



“Yet this one does have interesting angles,” Penny insisted. “Can’t you almost feel mystery lurking about the place?”

“No, but I do feel a mosquito sinking his stinger into me.” Salt slapped vigorously at his ankle.

They followed the path on toward the river, coming soon to a trail which branched off to the right. Across it had been stretched a wire barrier and a neatly lettered sign read:

NO ADMITTANCE BEYOND THIS POINT.

“Why do you suppose the path is blocked off?” Penny speculated.

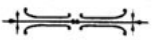
“Let’s find out,” Salt suggested with a sudden flare of interest. “Maybe we’ll run into something worth a picture.”

Penny hesitated, not wishing to disregard the sign, yet eager to learn what lay beyond the barrier.

“Listen,” said Salt, “just put your little conscience on ice. We’re here to get the ‘who, when, why and where.’ You’ll never be a first class newspaper reporter if you stifle your curiosity.”

“Lead on,” laughed Penny. “I will follow. Only isn’t it getting late?”

Salt looked at his watch. “We still have a safe fifteen minutes.”



He started to step over the wire, only to have Penny reach out and grasp his hand.

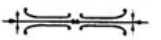
“Wait!” she whispered.

“What’s the idea?” Salt turned toward her in astonishment.

“I think someone is watching us! I’m sure I saw the bushes move.”

“Your nerves are jumpy,” Salt jeered. “It’s only the wind.”

Even as he spoke the foliage to the left moved ever so slightly and a dark form could be seen creeping stealthily away along the ground.



CHAPTER 5

THE MISSING BRIDEGROOM

Salt acted instinctively. Leaping over the wire barrier he dived into the bushes. Hurling himself upon the man who crouched there, he pinned him to the ground. The fellow gave a choked cry and tried to pull free.

"Oh, no, you don't," Salt muttered, coolly sitting down on his stomach. "Snooping, eh?"

"You let me up!" the man cried savagely. "Let me up, I say!"

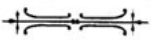
"I'll let you up when you explain what you were doing here."

"Why, you impudent young pup!" the man spluttered. "You're the one who will explain. I am Mrs. Kippenberg's head gardener."

Salt's hand fell from the old man's collar and he apologetically helped him to his feet. Penny, who had reached the scene, stooped down and recovered a trowel which had slipped from the gardener's grasp.

"It was just a little mistake on my part," Salt mumbled. "I hope I didn't hurt you."

"No fault of yours you didn't," the old man snapped. "A fine howdydo when a person can't



even loosen earth around a shrub without being assaulted by a ruffian!"

The gardener was a short, stout man with graying hair. He wore coarse garments, a loose fitting pair of trousers, a dark shirt and battered felt hat. But Penny noticed that his hands and fingernails were clean and there were no trowel marks around any of the shrubs.

"Salt isn't exactly a ruffian," she said as the photographer offered no defense. "After all, from where we stood it looked exactly as if you were hiding in the bushes."

"Then you both need glasses," the man retorted rudely. "A person can't work without getting down on his hands and knees."

"Where were you digging?" Penny asked innocently.

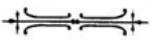
"I was just starting in when this young upstart leaped on my back!"

"Sorry," said Salt, "but I thought you were trying to get away."

"Who are you anyway?" the gardener demanded bluntly.

"You're not guests. I can tell that."

"You have a very discerning eye," replied Salt smoothly.



"We're from the Riverview Star."

"Reporters, eh?" The old man scowled unpleasantly. "Then you've no business being here at all. You're not wanted, so get out!"

"We're only after a few facts about the wedding," Penny said. "Perhaps you would be willing to tell me—"

"I'll tell you nothing, Miss! If anything is given out to the papers it will have to come from Mrs. Kippenberg."

"Fair enough," Salt acknowledged. He glanced curiously down the path which had been blocked off. "What's down there?"

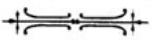
"Nothing." The gardener spoke irritably. "This part of the estate hasn't been fixed up. That's why it's closed."

Penny had bent down, pretending to examine a shrub at the edge of the path.

"What is the name of this bush?" she inquired casually.

"An azalea," the gardener replied after a slight hesitation. "Now get out of here, will you? I have my work to do."

"Oh, all right," Salt rejoined as he and Penny moved away. "No need to get so tough."



They stepped over the barrier wire and retraced their way toward the house. Several times Penny glanced back but she could not see the old man. He had slipped away somewhere among the trees.

“I don’t believe that fellow was a gardener,” she said suddenly.

“What makes you think not?”

“Didn’t you notice his nice clean hands and fingernails? And then when I asked him the name of that bush he hesitated and called it an azalea. I saw another long botanical name attached to it.”

“Maybe he just made a mistake, or said the first thing that came into his head. He wanted to get rid of us.”

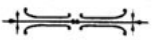
“I know he did,” nodded Penny. “Yet, when he found out we were from the Star he didn’t threaten to report us to Mrs. Kippenberg.”

“That’s so.”

“He was afraid to report us,” Penny went on with conviction. “I’ll bet a cent he has no more right here than we have.”

Salt had lost all interest in the gardener. He glanced at his watch and quickened his step.

“Is it two o’clock yet?” Penny asked anxiously.



“Just. After all the trouble we’ve had getting here we can’t afford to miss the big show.”

Emerging from the grove, Salt and Penny were relieved to see that the ceremony had not yet started. The guests were gathered in the garden, the minister stood waiting, musicians were in their places, but the bridal party had not appeared.

“We’re just in time,” Salt remarked.

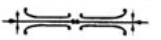
Penny observed Mrs. Kippenberg talking with one of the ushers. Even from a distance it was apparent that the woman had lost her poise. Her hands fluttered nervously as she conferred with the young man and a worried frown puckered her eyebrows.

“Something seems to be wrong,” said Penny. “I wonder what is causing the delay?”

Before Salt could reply, the usher crossed the lawn, and came directly toward them. Penny and Salt instantly were on guard, thinking that he had been sent by Mrs. Kippenberg to eject them from the grounds. But although the young man paused, he did not look squarely at them.

“Have you seen Mr. Atherwald anywhere?” he questioned.

“The bridegroom?” Salt asked in astonishment. “What’s the matter? Is he missing?”



“Oh, no, sir,” the young man returned stiffly. “Certainly not. He merely went away for a moment.”

“Mr. Atherwald came over on the same boat with us,” Penny volunteered.

“And did you see him enter the house?”

“No, he spoke to one of the servants and then went toward the garden.”

“Did you notice which path he took?”

“I believe it was this one.”

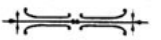
“We’ve just come from down by the river,” added Salt. “We didn’t see him there. The only person we met was an old gardener.”

The usher thanked them for the information and hurried on. When the man was beyond hearing, Salt turned to Penny, saying jubilantly:

“Say, maybe we’ll get a big story after all! Sylvia Kippenberg jilted at the altar! Hot stuff!”

“Aren’t you jumping to swift conclusions, Salt? He must be around here somewhere.”

“It’s always serious business when a man is late for his wedding. Even if he does show up, daughter Sylvia may take offense and call the whole thing off.”



“Oh, you’re too hopeful,” Penny laughed. “He’ll probably be here in another minute. I don’t believe he would have come at all if he had intended to slip away.”

“He may have lost his nerve at the last minute,” Salt insisted.

“Atherwald did act strangely on the boat,” Penny said reflectively. “And then that message he received—”

“He may have sent it to himself.” “As an excuse for getting away?” “Why not?”

“I can’t see any reason for going to so much unnecessary trouble,” Penny argued. “If he intended to jilt Miss Kippenberg how much easier it would have been not to come here at all.”

“Well, let’s see what we can learn,” Salt suggested.

Their interest steadily mounting, they went on toward the house and stationed themselves where they could see advantageously. It was evident by this time that the guests suspected something had gone amiss. Significant glances were exchanged, a few persons looked at their watches, and all eyes focused upon Mrs. Kippenberg who tried desperately to carry off an embarrassing situation.

Minutes passed. The crowd became increasingly restless. Finally, the usher returned and spoke

quietly to Mrs. Kippenberg. They both retired to the house.

“It looks as if there will be no wedding today,” Salt declared. “Atherwald hasn’t been located.”

“I won’t dare use the story unless I’m absolutely certain of my facts,” Penny said anxiously.

“We’ll get them, never fear.”

Mrs. Kippenberg and the usher had stepped into the breakfast room. Posting Penny at the outside door, Salt followed the couple. From the hallway he could hear their conversation distinctly.

“But he must be somewhere on the grounds,” the matron argued.

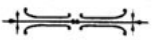
“I can’t understand it myself,” the young man replied. “Grant’s disappearance is very mysterious to say the least. Several persons saw him arrive here and everything seemed to be all right.”

“What time is it now?”

“Two thirty-five, Mrs. Kippenberg.”

“So late? Oh, this is dreadful! How can I face them?”

“I know just how you feel,” the young man said with sympathy. “If you wish I will explain to the guests.”



“No, no, this will disgrace us,” Mrs. Kippenberg murmured. “Wait until I have talked with Sylvia.”

She turned suddenly and reached the hall door before Salt could escape. Her eyes blazed with wrath as she faced him.

“So here you are!” she cried furiously. “How dare you disregard my orders? I will have no reporters on the grounds!”

“I’m only a photographer,” Salt said meekly enough. “Sorry to intrude but I’ve been assigned to get a picture of the bride. It won’t take a minute—”

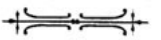
“Indeed it won’t,” Mrs. Kippenberg broke in, her voice rising higher. “You’ll take no pictures here. Not one! Now get out.”

“A picture might be better than a story that the bridegroom had skipped out,” Salt said persuasively.

“Why, you—you!” Mrs. Kippenberg’s face became fiery red. She choked as she tried to speak. “Get out, I say!”

Salt did not retreat. Instead he took his camera from his pocket.

“Just one picture, Mrs. Kippenberg. At least of you.”



Realizing that the photographer meant to take it whether or not she gave permission, the woman suddenly lost all control over her temper.

“Don’t you dare!” she cried furiously. “Don’t you dare!”

Whirling about, she seized an empty plate from the tall stack on the serving table.

“Hold that pose!” chortled Salt, goading her on.

The woman hurled the plate straight at him. Salt gleefully snapped a picture and dodged. The plate crashed into the wall behind him, splintering into a half dozen pieces.

“Swell action picture!” he grinned.

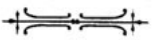
“Don’t you dare try to use it!” screamed Mrs. Kippenberg. “I’ll telephone your editor! I’ll have you discharged!”

“See here,” offered the usher, taking out his wallet. “I’ll give you ten dollars for that picture.”

Salt shook his head, still smiling broadly.

The sound of the crash had brought servants running to the scene.

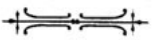
“Have this person ejected from the grounds,” Mrs. Kippenberg ordered harshly. “And see that he doesn’t get back.”



Just outside the house, Penny huddled against the wall, trying to make herself as inconspicuous as possible. She had heard everything. As Salt backed out the door he did not glance at her but he muttered for her ears alone:

“You’re on your own now, kid. I’ll be waiting at the drawbridge.”

An instant later two servants seized him roughly by the arms and escorted him down the walk to the boat landing.



CHAPTER 6

A RING OF WHITE GOLD

Penny waited anxiously, but Mrs. Kippenberg did not come to the outside door. Nor had it occurred to the two servants that the girl was connected in any way with the photographer.

"On my own," she repeated to herself. "On my own with a vengeance."

Salt had his picture and it was up to her to get a good story. Until now she had depended upon his guidance. With all support withdrawn she suddenly felt uncertain and incompetent.

Penny waited a few minutes before gathering sufficient courage to enter the long hallway. One glance assured her that the breakfast room was deserted.

"Mrs. Kippenberg probably went upstairs to talk with her daughter," she reasoned. "I'd like to hear what they say to each other."

With the guests assembled in the garden, only a few persons lingered in the house. No one paid heed to Penny as she moved noiselessly up the spiral stairway.

A bedroom door stood slightly ajar. Hearing a low murmur of voices, Penny paused. Framed against the leaded windows she saw Sylvia Kippenberg talking with her mother. Despite a tear-streaked

face the girl was very lovely. She wore a long flowing gown of white satin and the flowers at the neckline were outlined with real pearls. Her net veil had been discarded. A bouquet of flowers lay on the floor.

"How could Grant do such a cruel thing?" Penny heard her sob. "I just can't believe it of him, Mother. Surely he will come."

Mrs. Kippenberg held the girl in her arms, trying to comfort her.

"It is nearly three now, Sylvia. The servants have searched everywhere. A man of his type isn't worthy of you."

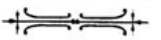
"But I love him, Mother. And I am sure he loves me. It doesn't seem possible he would do such a thing without a word of explanation."

"He will explain, never fear," Mrs. Kippenberg said grimly. "But now, we must think what has to be done. The guests must be told."

"Oh, Mother!" Sylvia went into another paroxysm of crying.

"There is no other way, my dear. Leave everything to me."

Before Penny realized that the interview had ended, Mrs. Kippenberg stepped out into the hall. Her eyes focused hard upon the girl.



“You are a reporter!” she accused harshly. “I remember, you were with that photographer!”

“Please—” began Penny.

“I’ll tell you nothing,” the woman cried. “How dare you intrude in my home and go about listening at bedroom doors!”

“Mrs. Kippenberg, if only you will calm yourself, I may be able to help you.”

“Help me?” the woman demanded. “What do you mean?”

“I may be able to give you a clue as to what became of Grant Atherwald.”

The anger faded from Mrs. Kippenberg’s face. She came close to Penny, grasping her arm with a pressure which hurt.

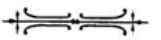
“You have seen him? Tell me!” “He came over in the same boat.” “How long ago was that?”

“Shortly after one o’clock. He was stopped at the front door by a servant who handed him a note. Mr. Atherwald read it and walked down toward the garden.”

“I wonder which one of the servants spoke to him? It was at the front door, you say?”

“Yes.”

“Then it must have been Gregg. I’ll talk with him.”



Forgetting Penny, Mrs. Kippenberg hastened down the stairway. She jangled a bell and asked that the manservant be sent to her. Unnoticed, Penny lingered to hear the interview.

The man came into the room. “You sent for me, Mrs. Kippenberg?” he inquired.

“Yes, Gregg. You were at the door when Mr. Atherwald arrived?”

“I was, Madam.”

“I understand you handed him a note which he read.” “Yes, Madam.”

“Who gave you the note?”

“Mrs. Latch, the cook. She told me it was brought to the kitchen door early this morning by a most disreputable looking boy.”

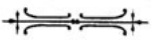
“He had been hired to deliver it for another person, I suppose?”

“Yes, Madam. The boy told Mrs. Latch that the message came from a friend of Mr. Atherwald’s and should be given to him as soon as he arrived.”

“You have no idea what the note contained?”

“No, Mrs. Kippenberg, the envelope was sealed.”

Sensing that when the interview ended Mrs. Kippenberg’s wrath might again descend upon her, Penny decided not to tempt fate. While the woman



was still talking with the servant, she slipped out of the house.

“Atherwald might have had that note sent to himself, but I doubt it,” she told herself. “Either he is still on the estate, or the boatman would have had to take him back across the river.”

She walked quickly down to the dock and was elated to find the guest launch tied up there. The boatman answered her questions readily. He had not seen Grant Atherwald since early in the afternoon. Salt was the only person he had taken back across the river.

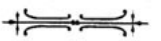
“Have you noticed any other boat leaving the estate?” inquired Penny.

“Boats have been going up and down the river all day,” the man answered with a shrug. “I didn’t notice any particular one.”

Penny glanced across the water. She could see Salt perched on the drawbridge waiting for her. But she was not yet ready to leave the estate.

Ignoring his shout to “come on,” she turned and walked back toward the house. Deliberately, she chose the same path which she and Salt had followed earlier in the afternoon.

A swift walk brought her to the forbidden trail with the barrier sign. Penny glanced around to be



certain she was not under observation. Then she stepped boldly over the wire.

Passing the place where she and Salt had talked with the gardener, she noticed his trowel lying on the ground. There was no evidence that he had done any work.

However, all along the path flowering shrubs were well trimmed and tended.

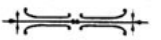
"So this part of the estate isn't fixed up," Penny mused. "It's much nicer than the other section in my opinion. I wonder why that gardener told so many lies?"

The path led deeper into the woods. Rustic benches invited one to linger, but Penny walked rapidly onward.

Unexpectedly, she came to a little clearing, and saw before her a large, circular pool. From a gap in the trees, warm sunshine poured down upon the bed of flowers which flanked the cement sides, making a circle of brilliant color.

"So this is where the path leads," thought Penny. "No mystery here after all."

She was at a loss to understand why this portion of the estate had been closed to visitors for certainly it was the most beautiful part. Yet there was a quality to the beauty which the girl did not like.



As she stood staring at the pool, she was fully aware of an uneasy feeling which had taken possession of her. It was almost as if she stood in the presence of something sinister and unknown. The gentle rustling of the tree leaves, the cool river air blowing against her cheek, only served to heighten the feeling.

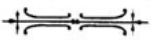
She drew closer and peered down into the blue depths of the pool. She could not see the bottom plainly for the water was choked with a tangle of feathery plants. A few yellow lilies floated on the surface.

Penny absently reached out to pluck one. But as the stem snapped off, she gave a little scream and dropped the flower. She had seen a large, shadowy form slithering through the water beneath her.

Penny backed a step away from the pool. From among the lily pads an ugly head emerged and a broad snout was raised above the surface for an instant. Powerful jaws opened and closed, revealing jagged teeth set in deep pits.

“An alligator!” Penny exclaimed aloud. “Such a horrid, ugly creature! And to think, I nearly put my hand in that water.”

She shivered and watched the movements of the alligator. Its head scooted smoothly over the water for a short distance. Then with a swish of its tail, the reptile submerged and the pool was as placid as before.



“Eight feet long if it’s an inch,” estimated Penny. “Why would any person in his right mind keep such a creature here? Why, it’s dangerous.”

She felt enraged, thinking how close she had come to touching the alligator. Yet justice compelled her to admit that she had only herself to blame. Deliberately, she had disregarded the warning not to explore the forbidden trail.

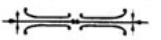
“The Kippenbergs keep nice pets,” she thought ironically. “If anyone fell into that pool it would be just too bad.”

Now that her curiosity was satisfied, Penny had not the slightest desire to linger near the lily pool. With another glance down into the murky depths she turned away, but she had taken less than a dozen steps when she paused. Her attention was held by a bright and shiny object which lay in the dust at her feet.

With a low cry of surprise she reached down and picked up a plain band of white gold. Obviously, it was a wedding ring.

“Now where did this come from?” Penny turned it over on the palm of her hand.

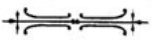
Startled thoughts leaped into her mind. She felt certain Grant Atherwald had taken this same path earlier in the afternoon. It was logical to believe that the ring had been his, intended for Sylvia



Kippenberg. Had he lost the band accidentally or deliberately thrown it away?

Slowly, Penny's gaze roved to the lily pond. She noted that the coping was so low that one who walked carelessly might easily stumble and fall into the water. It made her shudder to think of such a gruesome possibility, yet she could not avoid giving it consideration. For that matter, Grant Atherwald might have been lured to this isolated spot. The mysterious message—

Penny delved no deeper into the problem for suddenly she felt someone grasp her arms. With a terrified cry she whirled about to face her assailant.



CHAPTER 7

THE FORBIDDEN POOL

A wave of relief surged over Penny as she saw that it was the old gardener who held her fast.

"Oh, it's only you," she laughed shakily, trying to pull away. "For a second I thought the Bogey Man had me for sure."

The gardener did not smile.

"Didn't I tell you to keep away from here?" he demanded, giving her a hard shake.

"I'm not doing any h-harm," Penny stammered. She kept her hand closed over the white gold ring so that the old man would not see what she had found. "I just wanted to learn what was back in here."

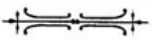
"And you found out?"

The gardener's tone warned Penny to be cautious in her reply.

"Oh, the pool is rather pretty," she answered carelessly. "But I've seen much nicer ones."

"How long have you been here?"

"Only a minute or two. I really came to search for Grant Atherwald."



“Atherwald? What would he be doing here?”

“He disappeared an hour or so ago,” revealed Penny. “The servants have been searching everywhere for him.”

“He disappeared?” the gardener repeated incredulously.

“Yes, it’s very peculiar. Mr. Atherwald arrived at the estate in ample time for the wedding. But after he read a note which was delivered to him he walked off in this direction and was seen no more.”

“Down this path, you mean?”

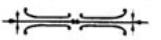
“I couldn’t say as to that, but he started this way. I know because I saw him myself.”

“Atherwald didn’t come here,” the gardener said with finality. “I’ve been working around the lily pond all afternoon and would have seen him.”

Penny’s fingers closed tightly about the white gold ring which she kept shielded from the man’s gaze. In her opinion the trinket offered almost conclusive proof that the bridegroom had visited the locality. Because she could not trust the gardener she kept her thoughts strictly to herself.

The man stared down at his feet, obviously disturbed by the information Penny had given him.

“Do you suppose harm could have befallen Mr. Atherwald?” she asked after a moment.



“Harm?” he demanded irritably. “That’s sheer nonsense. The fellow probably skipped out. He ought to be tarred and feathered!”

“And you would enjoy doing it?” Penny interposed slyly.

The gardener glared at her, making no attempt to hide his dislike.

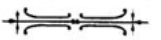
“Such treatment would be too good for anyone who hurt Miss Sylvia. Now will you get out of here? I have my orders and I mean to enforce them.”

“Oh, all right,” replied Penny. “I was going anyway.”

This was not strictly true, for had the gardener not been there she would have made a more thorough investigation of the locality near the lily pool. But now she had no hope of learning more, and so turned away.

Emerging from among the trees, she glanced toward the rose garden. Nearly all of the wedding guests had departed. Penny considered whether or not she should speak to Mrs. Kippenberg about finding the ring. Deciding against it, she joined a group of people at the boat dock and was ferried across the river.

Salt awaited her at the drawbridge.



“I just about gave you up,” he complained. “It’s time for us to get back to the office or our news won’t be news. The wedding is definitely off?”

“Yes, Atherwald can’t be found.”

“We’ll stop at a drug store and telephone,” Salt said, pulling her toward the car. “Learn anything more after I left?”

“Well, I found a wedding ring and was nearly chewed up by an alligator,” laughed Penny. “It seemed rather interesting at the time.”

The photographer gave her a queer look as he started the automobile.

“Imagination and journalism never mix,” he said.

“Does this look like imagination?” Penny countered, showing him the plain band ring.

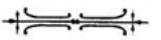
“Where did you find it?”

“Beside a lily pond in the forbidden part of the estate. I feel certain it must have been dropped by Grant Atherwald.”

“Thrown away?”

“I don’t know exactly what to think,” Penny replied soberly.

Salt steered the car into the main road which led back to Corbin. Then he inquired: “Did you notice



any signs of a struggle? Grass trampled? Footprints?"

"I didn't have a chance to do any investigating. That bossy old gardener came and drove me away."

"What were you saying about alligators?"

"Salt, I saw one swimming around in the lily pool," Penny told him earnestly. "It was an ugly brute, at least twelve feet long."

"How long?"

"Well, eight anyway."

"You're joking."

"I am not," Penny said indignantly.

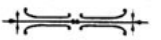
"Maybe it was only a big log lying in the water."

Penny gave an injured sniff. "Have it your own way. But it wasn't a log. I guess I can tell an alligator when I see one."

"If you're actually right," Salt said unmoved, "I'd like to have snapped a picture of it. You know, this story might develop into something big."

"I have a feeling it will, Salt."

"If Atherwald really has disappeared it should create a sensation!"



“And if the poor fellow had the misfortune to fall or be pushed into the lily pool Dad wouldn’t have headlines large enough to carry it!”

“Say, get a grip on yourself,” Salt advised. “The Riverview Star prints fact, not fancy.”

“That’s because so many of Dad’s reporters are stodgy old fellows,” laughed Penny. “But I’ll admit it isn’t very likely Grant Atherwald was devoured by the alligator.”

The car had reached Corbin. Salt drew up in front of a drug store.

“Run in and telephone DeWitt,” he said, opening the door for her. “And remember, stick to facts.”

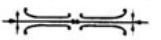
Penny was a little frightened as she entered the telephone booth and placed a long distance call to the Riverview Star. She never failed to feel nervous when she talked with DeWitt, the city editor, for he was not a very pleasant individual.

She jumped as the receiver was taken down and a voice barked: “City desk.”

“This is Penny Parker over at Corbin,” she began weakly.

“Can’t hear you,” snapped DeWitt. “Talk up.”

Penny repeated her name and DeWitt’s voice lost some of its edge. Gathering courage, she started to



tell him what she had learned at the Kippenberg estate.

“Hold it,” interrupted DeWitt. “I’ll switch you over to a rewrite man.”

The connection was made and Penny began a second time. Now and then the rewrite man broke into the narrative to ask a question.

“All right, I think I have it all,” he said finally and hung up.

Penny went back to the car looking as crestfallen as she felt.

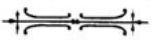
“I don’t know what they thought of the story,” she told Salt. “DeWitt certainly didn’t waste any words of praise.”

“He never does,” chuckled the photographer. “You’re lucky if you don’t get fired.”

“That’s one consolation,” returned Penny, settling herself for the long ride home. “He can’t fire me. Being the editor’s daughter has its advantages.”

The regular night edition of the Riverview Star was on the street by the time they reached the city. Salt signaled a newsboy and bought a paper while the car waited for a traffic light. He tossed it over to Penny.

“Here it is! My story!” she cried, and then her face fell.



“What’s the matter?” asked Salt. “Did they garble it all up?”

“They’ve cut it down to three inches! And not a word about the alligator or the lost wedding ring! I could cry! Why, I told that rewrite man enough to fill at least a column!”

“Well, anyway you made the front page,” the photographer consoled. “They may build the story up in the next edition after they get my pictures.”

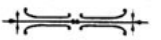
Penny said nothing, remaining in deep gloom during the remainder of the ride to the Star office. Salt let her out at the front door. She debated for a moment whether or not to go on home, but finally entered the building.

DeWitt was busy at his desk as she walked stiffly past. She hoped that he would notice how she ignored him, but he did not glance up from the copy before him.

Penny opened the door of her father’s private office and stopped short.

“Why, Dad?” she cried. “What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be home in bed.”

“I finally persuaded the doctor to let me out,” Anthony Parker replied, swinging around in his swivel chair. “How did you get along with your assignment?”



“I thought I did very well,” Penny said aloofly. “But from now on I’ll not telephone anything in. I’ll write the story myself.”

“Now don’t blame DeWitt or the rewrite man,” said Mr. Parker, smiling. “A paper has to be careful in what it publishes, especially about a wedding. Alligators are a bit too—shall we say sensational?”

“You made a similar remark about witch dolls,” Penny reminded him.

“I did eat my words that time,” Mr. Parker admitted, “but this is different. If we build up a big story about Grant

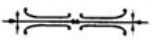
Atherwald’s disappearance, and then tomorrow he shows up at his own home, we’ll appear pretty ridiculous.”

“I guess you’re right,” Penny said, turning away. “Well, I’m happy to see you back in the office again.”

Mr. Parker watched her speculatively. When she reached the door he inquired: “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“What, Dad?”

“Today is Thursday.” The editor took a sealed envelope from the desk drawer. “This is the first time you have failed to collect your allowance in over a year.”



“I must be slipping.” Penny grinned as she pocketed the envelope.

“Why don’t you open it?”

“What’s the use?” Penny asked gloomily. “It’s always the same. Anyway, I borrowed two dollars last week so this doesn’t really belong to me.”

“You might be pleasantly surprised.”

Penny stared at her father with disbelief. “Dad! You don’t mean you’ve given me a raise!”

Eagerly, she ripped open the envelope. Three crisp dollar bills fluttered into her hand. With a shriek of delight, Penny flung her arms about her father’s neck.

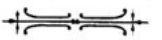
“I always try to reward a good reporter,” he chuckled. “Now take yourself off because my work is stacked a mile high.”

Penny tripped gaily toward the door but it opened before she could cross the room. An office boy came in with a message for Mr. Parker.

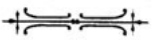
“Man to see you named Atherwald,” he announced.

The name produced an electrifying effect upon both Penny and her father.

“Atherwald!” Mr. Parker exclaimed. “Then he hasn’t disappeared after all! Show him in.”



“And I’m staying right here,” Penny declared, easing herself into the nearest chair. “I have a hunch that this interview may concern me.”



CHAPTER 8

PARENTAL PROTEST

In a few minutes the office boy returned, followed by a distinguished, middle-aged man who carried a cane. Penny gave him an astonished glance for she had expected to see Grant Atherwald. It had not occurred to her that there might be two persons with the same surname.

“Mr. Atherwald?” inquired her father, waving the visitor into a chair.

“James Atherwald.”

The man spoke shortly and did not sit down. Instead he spread out a copy of the night edition of the Star and pointed to the story which Penny had covered. She quaked inwardly, wondering what error of hers was to be exposed.

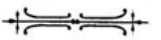
“Do you see this?” Mr. Atherwald demanded. “What about it?” inquired the editor pleasantly.

“You are holding my family up to ridicule by printing such a story! Grant Atherwald is my son!”

“Is the story incorrect?”

“Yes, you imply that my son deliberately jilted Sylvia Kippenberg!”

“And actually he didn’t?” Mr. Parker inquired evenly.



“Certainly not. My son is a man of honor and had a very deep regard for Sylvia. Under no circumstance would he have jilted her.”

“Still, the wedding did not take place.”

“That is true,” Mr. Atherwald admitted.

“Perhaps you can explain why it was postponed?”

“I don’t know what happened to Grant,” Mr. Atherwald said reluctantly. “He left our home in ample time for the ceremony, and I might add, was in excellent spirits. I believe he must have been the victim of a stupid, practical joke.”

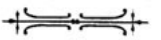
“Well, that suggests a new angle,” Mr. Parker remarked thoughtfully. “Did your son have friends who might be apt to play such a joke on him?”

“No one of my acquaintance,” Mr. Atherwald answered unwillingly. “Of course, he had many young friends who were not in my circle.”

Penny had listened quietly to the conversation. She now arose and came over to the desk. From her pocket she took the white gold wedding ring.

“Mr. Atherwald,” she said, “I wonder if you could identify this.”

The man studied the trinket for a moment.



“It looks very much like a ring which Grant purchased for Sylvia,” he declared. “Where did you get it?”

“I found it lying on the ground at the Kippenberg estate,” Penny replied vaguely. She had no intention of divulging the exact locality where she had picked up the ring.

“You see,” said Mr. Parker, “we have supporting facts in our possession which were not published. All in all, I think the story was handled discreetly, with due regard for the feelings of those involved.”

“Then you refuse to retract the story?”

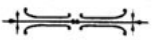
“I should like to oblige you, Mr. Atherwald, but you realize such a story as this is of great interest to our readers.”

“You care only for sensationalism!”

“On the contrary, we try to avoid it,” Mr. Parker corrected. “In this particular case, we deliberately played the story down. If it develops that your son actually has disappeared—”

“I tell you it was only a practical joke,” Mr. Atherwald interrupted. “No doubt my son is at home by this time. The wedding has merely been postponed.”

“You are entitled to your opinion,” said Mr. Parker. “And I sincerely hope that you are right.”



“At least do not use that picture which your photographer took of Mrs. Kippenberg. I’ll pay you for it.”

Mr. Parker smiled and shook his head.

“I might have expected such an attitude!” Mr. Atherwald exclaimed angrily. “Good afternoon.”

He left the office, slamming the door behind him.

“Well, you’ve lost another subscriber, Dad,” said Penny flippantly.

“He’s not the first,” returned her father.

“I intended to give Mr. Atherwald the wedding ring, but he went off in too big a hurry. Should I go after him?”

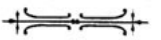
“No, don’t bother, Penny. You might take it around to the picture room and have it photographed. We may use it as Exhibit A if the story develops into anything.”

“How about the alligator?” Penny asked. “Would you like to have me bring that to the office, too?”

“Move out of here and let me work,” her father retorted.

Penny went to the photographic department and made her requirements known.

“I’ll wait for the ring,” she announced. “You don’t catch me trusting you boys with any jewelry.”



While the picture was being taken Salt came by with several damp prints in his hand.

“Take a look at this one, Penny,” he said proudly. “Mrs. Kippenberg wielding a wicked plate. Will she burn up when she sees it on the picture page?”

“She will, indeed,” agreed Penny. “Nice going.”

When the ring had been returned to her she slipped it into her pocket and left the newspaper office. Her next stop was at a corner hamburger shop where she fortified herself with two large sandwiches.

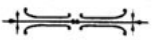
“That ought to hold me until the dinner bell rings,” she thought. “And now to pay my honest debts.”

A trolley ride and a short walk brought Penny to the home of her chum, Louise Sidell. As she came within sight of the front porch she saw her friend sitting on the steps, reading a movie magazine. Louise threw it aside and sprang to her feet.

“Oh, Penny, I’m glad you came over. I telephoned your house and Mrs. Weems said you had gone away somewhere.”

“Official business for Dad,” Penny laughed. She dropped two dollars into Louise’s hand. “Here’s what I owe you. But don’t go spend it because I may need to borrow it back in a couple of days.”

“Is Leaping Lena running up huge garage bills again?” Louise inquired sympathetically.



Penny's second-hand car was a joke to everyone save herself. She was a familiar figure at nearly every garage in Riverview, for the vehicle had a disconcerting way of breaking down.

"I had to buy new spark plugs this time," sighed Penny. "But then, I should get along better from now on. Dad raised my allowance."

"Doesn't that call for a celebration? Rini's have a special on today. A double chocolate sundae with pineapple and nuts, cherry and—"

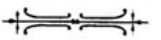
"Oh, no, you don't! I'm saving my dollar for the essentials of life. I may need it for gasoline if I decide to drive over to Corbin again."

"Again?" Louise asked alertly.

"I was over there today, covering the Kippenberg wedding," Penny explained. "Only it turned out there was no ceremony. Grant Atherwald jilted his bride, or was spirited away by persons unknown. He was last seen near a lily pool in an isolated part of the estate. I picked up a wedding ring lying on the ground close by. And then as a climax Mrs. Kippenberg hurled a plate at Salt."

"Penny Parker, what are you saying?" Louise demanded. "It sounds like one of those two-reel thrillers they show over at the Rialto."

"Here is the evidence," Penny said, showing her the white gold ring.



“It’s amazing how you get into so much adventure,” Louise replied enviously as she studied the trinket. “Start at the beginning and tell me everything.”

The invitation was very much to Penny’s liking. Perching herself on the highest porch step she recounted her visit to the Kippenberg estate, painting an especially romantic picture of the castle dwelling, the moat, and the drawbridge.

“Oh, I’d love to visit the place,” Louise declared. “You have all the luck.”

“I’ll take you with me if I ever get to go again,” promised Penny. “Well, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

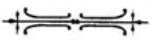
And with this careless farewell, she sprang to her feet, and hastened on home.

The next morning while Mrs. Weems was preparing breakfast, Penny ran down to the corner to buy the first edition of the Star. As she spread it open a small headline accosted her eye.

“NO TRACE OF MISSING BRIDEGROOM.”

Penny read swiftly, learning that Grant Atherwald had not been seen since his strange disappearance from the Kippenberg estate. Members of the family refused to discuss the affair and had made no report to the police.

“This story is developing into something big after all,” she thought with quickening pulse. “Now if Dad will only let me work on it!”



At home she gave the newspaper to her father, remarking rather pointedly: “You see, your expert reporters haven’t learned very much more than I brought in yesterday. Why wouldn’t it be a good idea to send me out there again today?”

“Oh, I doubt if you could get into the estate, Penny.”

“Salt and I managed yesterday.”

“You did very well, but you weren’t known then. It will be a different matter today since we antagonized the family by using the story. I’ll suggest that Jerry Livingston be assigned to it.”

“With Penny as first assistant?”

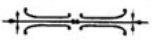
Mr. Parker smiled and shook his head. “This isn’t your type of story. Now if you would like to cover a lecture at the Women’s Club—”

“Or a nice peppy meeting of the Ladies Sewing Circle,” Penny finished ironically. “Thank you, no.”

“I am sure you wouldn’t have a chance of getting into the estate,” her father said lamely. “We must have good coverage.”

“What does Jerry have that I haven’t got?” Penny demanded in an aggrieved voice.

“Eight years of experience for one thing.”



“But I really should go out there,” Penny insisted. “I ought to show Miss Kippenberg the ring I found.”

“The ring might provide an entry,” Mr. Parker admitted thoughtfully. “I’ll tell you, why don’t you telephone long distance?”

“And if I’m able to make an appointment, may I help Jerry cover the story?”

“All right,” agreed Mr. Parker. “If Sylvia Kippenberg talks with you we’ll be able to use anything she says.”

“I’m the same as on my way to the estate now, Dad.”

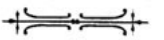
With a triumphant laugh, Penny left the breakfast table and hastened to the telephone.

“Long distance,” she said into the transmitter. “The Kippenberg estate at Corbin, please.”

She hovered anxiously near the telephone while she waited for the connection to be made. Ten minutes elapsed before the bell jingled several times. Eagerly, she jerked down the receiver. She could hear a faint, far-away voice saying, “hello.”

“May I speak with Sylvia Kippenberg?” Penny requested.

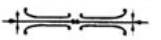
“Who is this, please?” “Miss Parker at Riverview.”



“Miss Kippenberg is not at home,” came the stiff response.

“Then let me speak with Mrs. Kippenberg,” Penny said quickly. “I have something very important to tell her. Yesterday when I was at the estate I found a ring—”

The receiver had clicked at the other end of the line. The connection was broken.



CHAPTER 9

A SOCIETY BAZAAR

"You see, Penny," said Mr. Parker sympathetically, "wealthy people have a way of being inaccessible to the press. They surround themselves with servants who have been trained to allow no invasion of their privacy. They erect barriers which aren't easily broken down."

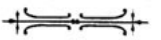
"If only I could have reached Miss Kippenberg I feel sure she would have wished to learn about the ring," returned Penny. "Oh, well, let Jerry cover the story. I've lost interest."

All that morning the girl went about the house in a mood of deep depression. She felt completely out of sorts and would scowl at her own reflection whenever she passed a mirror. Nothing seemed to go right.

"I declare, I wish you would forget that silly wedding," Mrs. Weems said wearily. "Why don't you try working out your resentment on a tennis ball?"

"Not a bad idea," admitted Penny. "Only I have no partner. Louise is going away somewhere today to a charity bazaar."

"Here in Riverview?" inquired Mrs. Weems with interest.



“No, it’s to be held at Andover, twenty miles from Corbin. Louise is going with an aunt of hers. She invited me several days ago, but I didn’t think it would be any fun.”

“You might enjoy it. Why don’t you go?”

“I wonder if it isn’t too late?” Penny glanced at the clock.

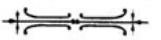
A telephone call to the Sidell home assured her that she would have ample time to get ready for the trip. She quickly dressed and was waiting when Louise and her aunt, Miss Lucinda Frome, drove up to the door.

“What sort of an affair is it?” Penny inquired as they traveled toward the distant town.

Miss Frome explained that the bazaar was being sponsored by members of the D.A.R. organization and would be held at one of the fashionable clubs of the city. As Miss Frome belonged to the Riverview chapter she and her guests would have an entry.

“I look forward to meeting a number of prominent persons today,” the woman declared. “The Andover chapter has a very exclusive membership.”

Louise winked at Penny, for it was a source of amusement to her that her aunt stood in awe of society personages. Neither she nor her chum suffered from social ambition or a feeling of inferiority.



At Andover, Miss Frome drove the car to the City Club and parked it beside a long row of other automobiles, many of which were under the charge of uniformed chauffeurs.

“Oh, dear,” remarked Miss Frome nervously, “I didn’t realize how shabby my old coupe looks. I do hope no one notices.”

“Now don’t start that, Aunty,” Louise said, taking her by the arm. “Your car is perfectly all right. And so are you.”

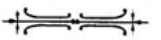
They went up the steps of the stone building and mingled with the other women. So many persons were present that the three newcomers attracted no attention. Miss Frome was reassured to see that she was as well dressed as anyone in the room.

Several long tables were covered with various articles offered for sale. Penny and Louise wandered about examining objects which struck their fancy. Miss Frome bought a vase and an imitation ivory elephant, but the girls considered the prices too high for their purses.

Presently, Penny’s gaze was drawn to a young woman who stood behind one of the tables at the far end of the room. She stopped short and stared.

“See someone you know?” inquired Louise.

“Why, that young woman with the dark hair and the lace dress, Louise! She is Sylvia Kippenberg!”



“Really? I must say she has courage to come here today after all that happened!”

The young woman did not realize that she was being subjected to scrutiny. However, she seemed fully aware that she was a general object of curiosity, for her lips were frozen in a set smile and her face was pale despite the rouge on the smooth cheeks.

“I suppose she must be on the bazaar committee,” Louise went on. “But my, if anyone had jilted me, I would not have come here today.”

“Jerry must have missed his interview after all,” Penny murmured, half to herself.

“Jerry?”

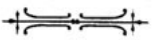
“Yes, Dad assigned him to the Kippenberg story. I suppose he drove to Corbin today in the hope of seeing Miss Sylvia.”

“And she may have come here just to escape reporters.”

“For two cents I’d try to interview her myself,” Penny said.

“Do you think she would talk with you?”

“Not if she realizes I am a reporter. But at least I can try.”



“Don’t create a scene whatever you do,” Louise warned uneasily. “Not that I would mind. But Aunt Lucinda would die of mortification.”

“I’ll try to be careful,” Penny promised.

She sauntered forward, gradually working toward the table where the young woman served. Selecting an article at random from the display, she inquired its price.

“Ten dollars,” Miss Kippenberg answered mechanically.

Penny loitered at the table until two elderly women had moved on. She was now alone with Sylvia Kippenberg. She would have no better opportunity to speak with her.

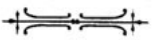
“Miss Kippenberg,” she began.

“Yes?” The young woman really gazed at the girl for the first time. Penny saw that her eyelids were red and swollen from recent tears.

“I should like to talk with you alone, please.”

“Do I know your name?” Miss Kippenberg asked coldly. “Penny Parker.”

“Parker—Parker,” the young woman repeated and her eyes hardened. “Oh, yes, you are the girl who came to our place yesterday with that photographer! And you telephoned again this morning.”



“Yes,” Penny admitted reluctantly, “but—” The young woman did not allow her to finish.

“I’ll not talk with you or any other reporter. You have no right to come here and annoy me.”

“Please, I’m not really a reporter, Miss Kippenberg. I have something to show you.”

Miss Kippenberg had closed her ears to Penny’s words. She turned abruptly and fled in the direction of the powder room.

Penny hesitated, remembering her promise to create no scene. Still, she could not allow Miss Kippenberg to elude her so easily. Determinedly, she followed.

“Please, Miss Kippenberg, you must listen to me,” she pleaded.

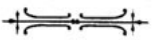
Observing that her words had not the slightest effect upon the girl, she suddenly opened her purse and took out the white gold ring. She thrust it in front of Miss Kippenberg.

“I only wish to show you this.”

The young woman stopped short, gazing down at the ring.

“Where did you get it?” she asked in a low tone.

“Then you do recognize it?”



“Of course. Grant showed it to me the night before we were to have been married. Tell me, how did it come into your hands?”

“We can’t talk here.”

Miss Kippenberg glanced quickly about and observing that many eyes were focused upon them, led the girl into the deserted powder room. They sat down on a sofa in a secluded corner.

“I didn’t mean to be so rude before,” Miss Kippenberg apologized. “It was only because I must protect myself from reporters and photographers. You have no idea how I have been annoyed.”

“I do understand,” said Penny, “and I wish to help you. That was why I was so insistent upon talking with you. I think this ring may be a clue to Mr. Atherwald’s disappearance.”

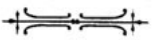
“Then you believe as I do that he did not go away purposely?”

“My theory is that Mr. Atherwald was a victim of a plot. Did he have any known enemies?”

“Oh, no, everyone liked Grant. Tell me about the ring. Who gave it to you?”

“No one. I found it while I was exploring a path on the estate, the trail which is blocked off.”

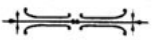
“You shouldn’t have gone there, but no matter. Just where did you pick up the ring?”



“I found it near the lily pool.”

Miss Kippenberg stared at Penny with expressionless, half-glazed eyes.

“Oh!” she murmured. Her head dropped low, her body sagged and she slumped down on the sofa in a faint.



CHAPTER 10

A THROWN STONE

Penny's first thought was to call for assistance, but sober reflection made her realize that to do so would likely result in awkward questions. She felt certain Miss Kippenberg had only fainted and would soon revive.

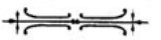
Stretching the young woman full length upon the sofa, the girl ran to the washroom for a glass of water. She dampened a towel and folded it across Miss Kippenberg's forehead, at the same time rubbing the limp hands and trying to restore circulation. Noticing the white gold ring which had fallen to the floor, she reached down and picked it up.

"Miss Kippenberg must have fainted because of what I told her about the lily pond," thought Penny. "I should have used more tact."

She watched the young woman anxiously, fearing that what she had assumed to be an ordinary faint might really be a heart attack. A wave of relief surged over her as Miss Kippenberg stirred slightly. Her long dark eyelashes fluttered open and she stared blankly about her.

"Where am I?" she asked, moistening her dry lips.

"Here, drink this," Penny urged, offering the glass of water. "You'll feel much better in a few minutes."



“Now I remember,” Miss Kippenberg murmured. “You were saying—”

“Don’t think about that now. Just lie still and relax.”

Miss Kippenberg did not try to speak again for some little time. Then, despite Penny’s protests, she raised herself to a sitting position.

“I feel quite all right now,” she insisted. “How stupid of me to faint.”

“I am afraid I was very tactless.”

“On the contrary, our conversation had nothing to do with it.”

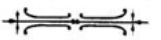
“I thought—”

“It was the heat,” Miss Kippenberg insisted. “I had a sunstroke once and since then I can’t bear even an overheated room.”

“But it really isn’t very warm in here,” protested Penny. “I don’t notice it at all.”

“You might not but I am very sensitive to it.”

“Well, I’m glad your faint wasn’t caused by anything I said,” Penny declared, although she continued to regard the young woman dubiously. “I thought you seemed shocked by what I told you about the ring.”



“You were saying that you picked it up near the lily pond?” Miss Kippenberg questioned in a low tone.

“Yes,” replied Penny, watching her closely. “I wish I knew the exact place.”

“If we could go to your estate together I could show you,” Penny said eagerly.

Miss Kippenberg hesitated in her reply, obviously still prejudiced against the girl because of her connection with the Riverview Star.

“Very well,” she agreed. “Will you please ask that my car be sent to the door?”

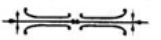
“Gladly,” said Penny, trying not to show her jubilance.

Leaving Miss Kippenberg in the powder room she returned to the main hall. Louise separated from the crowd and hurried to meet her.

“Oh, Penny, I saw you go off with Miss Kippenberg,” she began. “Would she talk with you?”

“She did,” answered Penny, “and now I’m going with her to the estate.”

“But Aunt Lucinda expects to start home in a few minutes,” protested Louise. “How long will you be gone?”



"I haven't the slightest idea. If I'm not back here by the time you are ready to leave don't wait for me."

"But how will you get home?"

"Oh, I'll find a way. The important thing now is to learn everything I can from Miss Kippenberg. She's in a mood to talk."

"I'd love to visit the estate," Louise said wistfully.

"I wish I could take you," Penny told her sincerely, "but I don't see how I can this time."

"Of course not, Penny. It would be very foolish of you to try. You might lose your own chance to gain an exclusive news story."

"Will you explain to your aunt about my sudden disappearance?"

"Yes, she'll understand," Louise replied. "We'll wait here for you at least an hour."

Penny left a call for Miss Kippenberg's car and then went back to the powder room. The young woman walked a bit unsteadily even with aid. However, no one paid attention to them as they crossed the main hall and made their way to the waiting automobile.

With Penny and Miss Kippenberg as passengers the big limousine rolled away from the clubhouse and sped toward Corbin. During the ride the young woman scarcely spoke. She sat with her head against the cushion, eyes half closed. As they came

within view of the drawbridge she made an effort to arouse herself.

“I see you have visitors at the estate,” Penny commented, noticing a number of cars parked near the river’s edge.

“Reporters, always reporters,” returned Miss Kippenberg impatiently. “They may try to board as we pass.”

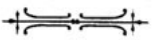
Penny wondered how the limousine would be taken across the river. The old watchman had noted their approach. Before the car reached the end of the road he had lowered the creaking drawbridge into position.

“Is the bridge really safe?” Penny inquired of her companion.

“For light traffic only,” Miss Kippenberg answered briefly.

The arrival of the car had created a stir of interest among the group of men gathered near the bridge. Penny caught sight of Jerry Livingston and could not resist rolling down the side window so he would be sure to obtain a clear view of her. It gave her a very pleasant feeling to see him stare as if he could not believe his own eyes.

Several of the reporters attempted to stop the limousine but without success. The car clattered



over the drawbridge which was pulled up again before anyone could follow.

Penny and Miss Kippenberg alighted at the front door of the great house.

“Now show me where you found the ring,” requested the young woman.

Penny led her down the winding path into the grove.

“I hope we don’t meet your head gardener,” she said significantly. “He seems to be such an unpleasant individual.”

Miss Kippenberg glanced at her queerly. “Why, how do you mean?”

“Oh, yesterday he ordered me away from here in no uncertain terms.”

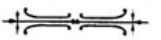
“He only meant to do his duty.”

“Then the man has been ordered to keep persons away from this part of the estate?”

“I really couldn’t tell you,” Miss Kippenberg answered aloofly. “Mother has charge of the servants.”

“Has the man been in your employ long?”

“I can’t tell you that either.” Miss Kippenberg’s voice warned Penny that she did not care to be questioned.



There was no sign of the old gardener as they came presently to the lily pool. Penny searched about in the grass for a few minutes.

“Here is where I found the ring,” she revealed. “And see this!”

“What?” Miss Kippenberg drew in her breath sharply.

“Footprints.”

“That doesn’t seem so remarkable.” The young woman bent to examine them. “They probably were made by Grant’s own shoe.”

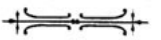
“But it looks as if there might have been a struggle here,” Penny insisted. “From those marks wouldn’t you say a body had been dragged across the ground toward the pool?”

“No!” cried Miss Kippenberg. “The grass is trampled, but I can’t believe Grant has met with violence. I refuse to think of such a thing! The pool —” she broke off and a shudder wracked her body.

“It is best to know the truth. Have you notified the police about Mr. Atherwald’s disappearance?”

Miss Kippenberg shook her head. “Until today I thought he would return. Or at least I hoped so.”

“It seems to me an expert should be called into the case,” Penny urged. “Why don’t you telephone the police station now?”



“I couldn’t,” returned Sylvia looking very miserable. “Not without consulting Mother.”

“Then let’s talk with her now.”

“She isn’t at home this afternoon.”

“But something should be done, and at once,” Penny protested. “The first rain will destroy all these footprints and perhaps other important evidence. Do you really love Grant Atherwald?”

“With all my heart,” answered the young woman soberly.

“Then I should think you would have some interest in what became of him. I can’t understand your attitude at all.”

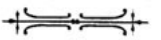
“I—I have others to think of besides myself.”

“Your mother, you mean?”

“Yes.” Sylvia avoided Penny’s penetrating gaze.

“Surely your mother wouldn’t wish an act of violence to go unpunished. So much time has been lost already.”

“We aren’t certain anything has happened to Grant,” Sylvia responded, her eyes downcast. “If we should bring the police into the case, and then it turns out that he has merely gone away to some other city, I’d be held up to ridicule once more.”



“It seems to me you are taking a most foolish attitude.”

“There is another reason why we must be very careful,” Sylvia said unwillingly.

“And what is that?”

For just an instant Penny dared hope that the young woman meant to answer the question. But Sylvia seemed to reconsider for she said quickly: “I can’t tell you. Please don’t ask me any more questions.”

“Are you afraid you may be blamed for Mr. Atherwald’s disappearance?” Penny persisted.

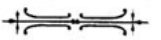
“No, no, I assure you I am not thinking of myself. Please, let’s return to the house.”

Penny deliberately blocked the path.

“Unless you wish me to notify the police there is a little matter which I must ask you to explain.”

Reaching down she picked up a small stone and hurled it into the lily pond. As the ripples died away they both observed a convulsive movement of the water, a churning which had no relation to the missile thrown.

“I think,” said Penny evenly, “that you understand my meaning.”



CHAPTER 11

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Miss Kippenberg watched the concentric circles race each other to the far edge of the lily pool.

"Then you know the reason why this part of the estate is kept closed off?" she murmured, very low.

"I learned about the alligator yesterday," said Penny. "Why is such an ugly brute kept here?"

"It was none of my doing, I assure you. I hate the horrid thing. Surely you don't mean to suggest—"

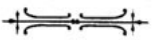
"I am not suggesting anything yet," said Penny quietly. "But you must realize that it is rather unusual to keep an alligator on one's estate."

"My father brought it here from Florida," Miss Kippenberg revealed reluctantly. "For some reason the creature seemed to fascinate him. He insisted upon keeping it in the pond."

"Your father is not living here now I am told."

"That is true." Miss Kippenberg quickly switched the subject back to the alligator. "Mother and I would like to get rid of the beast but we've never been able to do it."

"Any zoo should be willing to take it off your hands."



“Mother often spoke of getting in touch with one but for some reason she never did. I suppose she hesitated to give the alligator away upon Father’s account.”

Penny remained silent, wondering how deeply she dared probe into the private life of the Kippenberg family. After all there were certain inquiries which a person of sensibility could not make. She couldn’t very well ask: “Have your parents separated? Why did your father leave home? Is it true he is wanted by the authorities for evading income tax?” although these questions were upon the tip of her tongue.

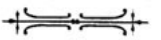
She did say carelessly, “Your father is away, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” Miss Kippenberg answered briefly. After a moment she went on: “Father was rather peculiar in many ways. He had a decided flare for the unusual. Take this estate for instance. He had it built at great expense to resemble a castle he once saw in Germany.”

“I’ve never visited such an elegant place.”

“It is entirely too flamboyant for my taste. But Father loved every tower and turret. If only things had turned out different—”

Her voice trailed away and she stared at the ground, lost in deep thought. Arousing herself, she went on once more.



“If you had known Father you would understand it was not strange for him to have an alligator on the estate. At one time he kept imported peacocks. The place was fairly overrun with them.”

Penny offered no comment. She moved closer to the edge of the lily pool, gazing down into the now tranquil waters.

“I know what you are trying to imply,” Miss Kippenberg said jerkily. “It couldn’t be possible. I refuse even to consider such a ridiculous theory.”

“It does seem rather far-fetched,” Penny admitted. “Of course, tragedies do occur and those foot-prints —”

“Please, not another word or you’ll drive me into hysterics!” Sylvia cried. “You are trying to play upon my feelings so that I will tell you things! You are only trying to get a story! I’ll not talk with you any longer.”

She turned and ran up the path toward the house.

“Overplayed my hand that time,” thought Penny ruefully. “As Dad says, I really have too much imagination to make a good reporter. Also too lively a tongue.”

Miss Kippenberg had vanished into the house by the time the girl retraced her way to the garden. The black limousine no longer stood at the front

door so she knew she was expected to get back to Andover by her own efforts.

“If Jerry is still waiting at the drawbridge, I’ll ride home with him,” she told herself. “Otherwise, I’m out of luck completely.”

The path which Penny followed brought her toward the rear of the house. As she drew near, the kitchen door suddenly opened and a stout woman in a blue uniform came outside. In her arms she carried two large paper sacks which appeared to be filled with garbage for the bottoms were moist.

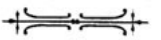
Just as the woman reached Penny one of the bags gave away, allowing a collection of corn husks, watermelon rinds and egg shells to fall on the sidewalk.

“Now I’ve done it!” she exclaimed crossly. “Splattered my stockings too.”

“Oh, that’s too bad,” said Penny, pausing.

“This is the only place I ever worked where the cook was expected to carry out the garbage!” the woman complained. “It makes me good and mad every time I do it.”

“I should think a house of this size would have an incinerator so that the garbage could be burned,” Penny remarked.



“Say, this place doesn’t have any conveniences for the servants,” the cook went on. “You’re expected to work, work, work from morning to night.”

She broke off quickly, regarding Penny with a suspicious gaze. “You’re not one of Miss Sylvia’s guests?” she demanded.

“Oh, no, I only came here on an errand. I wouldn’t repeat anything to the family.”

“That’s all right then,” the woman said in relief. “I liked my job here well enough until lately. All month it’s been one dinner party after another. Then we spent days getting ready for the wedding feast and not one scrap of food was touched!”

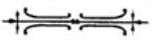
“But I suppose Mrs. Kippenberg pays you well.”

“Listen, she didn’t give me one extra cent for all the work I did. Mrs. Kippenberg always has been real close, and she’s a heap worse since her husband went away. Another week like this last one and I quit!”

“Well, I can’t say I blame you,” Penny said, leading the woman on. “I suppose Miss Sylvia is as overbearing as her mother?”

“Oh, Miss Sylvia is all right, as sweet a girl as you’ll find anywhere. I felt mighty sorry for her when that no- account man threw her over.”

Penny knew by this time that she must be talking with Mrs. Latch, for the footman had mentioned



the cook's name. As the woman walked on with her bundles of garbage she fell into step with her.

"It was strange about Mr. Atherwald's disappearance," she remarked. "I hear he came to the house and then went away just before the wedding."

"I can tell you about that," replied Mrs. Latch with an important air. "Yesterday morning a boy came to the back door with a letter for Mr. Atherwald. It's my opinion he sent it to himself."

"Didn't the boy tell you where he had obtained the letter?"

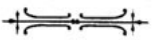
"He said it was given to him by one of Mr. Atherwald's friends. A man in a boat."

"Oh, I see," said Penny, making a mental note of the information. Realizing that the cook had told everything she knew about the matter, she quickly switched the subject. "By the way, who is the head gardener here?"

"Do you mean Peter Henderson?"

"A fairly old man," described Penny. "Gray hair, stooped shoulders, and I might add, an unpleasant manner."

"I guess that's Peter. He's not much of a gardener in my opinion. And he feels too high and mighty to associate with the other servants. He doesn't even stay here nights."



“Is he a new man?”

“Mrs. Kippenberg hired him only three days before the wedding. I don’t think he’s done a lick of honest work since he came here.”

“And Mrs. Kippenberg doesn’t mind?”

“She’s been too busy and bothered to pay any attention to him,” the cook declared. “But she always has time to boss me. I tell you, if dishes aren’t prepared perfectly she raves!”

“No wonder Mr. Kippenberg was forced to leave home,” Penny interposed slyly. “You can’t blame him for running away from a violent temper.”

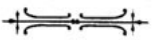
“Oh, the Kippenbergs never had any trouble,” Mrs. Latch corrected. “Mr. Kippenberg would just laugh and not say a word when she jumped on him. They were never heard to quarrel.”

“Then it seems odd that he went away.”

“Yes, it does,” agreed the cook, frowning. “I never did understand it. And then the way Mrs. Kippenberg changed all the servants!”

“You mean after Mr. Kippenberg went away?”

“She fired everyone except me. I guess she knew she couldn’t get another cook half as good if she let me go. Right away I struck for more money and she gave it to me without a whimper. But since then she works me like a dog.”



Mrs. Latch clattered the lid of the garbage can into place and turned toward the house. But as Penny once more fell into step with her, she paused and regarded the girl with sudden suspicion.

“Say, why am I telling you all this anyway? Who are you? You’re not one of those sneaking reporters?”

“Do I look like a reporter?” countered Penny.

“Well, no, you don’t,” admitted Mrs. Latch. “But you’re as inquisitive as one. You must be the girl who brought Miss Sylvia’s new dress from the LaRue Shoppe.”

Penny hesitated too long over her reply, and the woman gazed at her sharply.

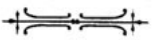
“You are a reporter!” she exclaimed with conviction. “And you’ve been deliberately pumping me! Of all the tricks! I’ll tell Miss Kippenberg!”

“Wait, I can explain.”

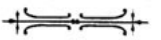
Mrs. Latch paid no heed. With an angry toss of her head she hastened into the house.

“Overstepped myself again,” Penny thought in dismay. “I’ll be getting away from here while the getting is good.”

Turning, she ran down the walk toward the river, only to stop short as she reached the boat dock. The drawbridge was in open position and the old



watchman did not appear to be at his usual post. She had no way of reaching the mainland.



CHAPTER 12

FISHERMAN'S LUCK

Penny looked anxiously about for a means of crossing the river. There were no small boats available and the only person who stood on the opposite shore was Jerry Livingston. The other reporters and photographers, evidently tiring of their long vigil, had gone away.

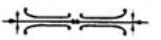
She cupped her hands and shouted to Jerry: "How am I going to get over there? Can you lower the bridge?"

"The mechanism is locked," called back the reporter. "And the watchman won't be back for an hour."

Penny walked a short distance up the shore searching for a boat. The only available craft was the large launch which she could not hope to operate. She might return to the house and appeal to Miss Kippenberg but such a course was not to her liking.

As she considered whether or not to ruin her clothing by swimming across, Jerry called her attention to a small boat some distance up the river. The boy who was fishing from it obligingly rowed ashore after Penny had signaled him.

"I'll give you fifty cents to ferry me across," she offered. "I'll be glad to do it," he agreed.



Penny stepped into the boat and then asked: "Aren't you the same lad I saw here yesterday?"

The boy nodded as he reached for the oars. "I remember you," he answered.

"You seem to fish here nearly every day."

"Just about. I caught some nice ones today." Proudly he held up two large fish for her to see.

"Beauties," praised Penny. "I take it the motor boats haven't been bothering you as much as they were."

"It's been pretty quiet on the river today," the boy agreed. "Want to see something else I fished up?"

"Why, yes. What did you hook, a mud turtle?"

The boy opened a large wooden box which contained an assortment of rope, fishing tackle and miscellaneous articles. He lifted out a man's high silk hat, bedraggled and shapeless.

"You fished that out of the water?" Penny demanded, leaning forward to take the article from him. "Where did you find it?"

"Up there a ways." The boy motioned vaguely toward a point on the Kippenberg estate.

Penny turned the hat over in her hand, examining it closely. She found no identifying marks, yet she believed that it had belonged to Grant Atherwald

for he had worn similar headdress. The point indicated by the boy was not far distant from the Kippenberg lily pool.

“How would you like to sell this hat?” she asked. “Why, it’s not worth anything.”

“I’d like to have it,” said Penny. “I’ll give you another fifty cents.”

“It’s a deal.”

Penny offered the boy a dollar bill, and a moment later he beached the boat. Jerry was waiting to help her ashore. His alert gaze fastened upon the hat which she hugged close, but he withheld comment. To the boy he said:

“Son, how would you like to earn five dollars?”

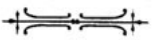
The boy’s eyes brightened. “Say, this is my lucky day!” he exclaimed. “What doin’?”

“It’s easy,” Jerry told him. “All you need to do is to be here for a couple of days with your boat. You’re not to allow anyone to use it except me.”

“And me,” added Penny. “I’ll need taxi service myself if I come back here.”

“That’s all right,” agreed the boy.

“Here’s a dollar on deposit,” Jerry said. “Now remember, be here tomorrow from eight o’clock on, and don’t hire out to any other person.”



“I won’t,” the boy promised.

Jerry took Penny’s elbow and escorted her to the press car.

“So you found Atherwald’s hat?” he asked without preliminaries.

“It resembles the one he wore. The boy fished it out of the river.”

“Then that looks as if the fellow really was the victim of a plot!”

“I’ve thought so all along,” Penny declared soberly.

“What else did you learn? You seemed to be very chummy with Miss Kippenberg.”

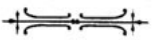
“I’ll not be from now on,” Penny returned ruefully.

As Jerry backed the car around in the dusty road, she told of her meeting with Sylvia Kippenberg and the ensuing conversation.

“So Miss Kippenberg doesn’t like questions?” Jerry asked. “And she refuses to notify the police? Well, after we publish our story in the Star it won’t be necessary. The police will come to do their own investigating.”

“I can’t really believe she is trying to deceive the authorities,” Penny said thoughtfully. “She seems to have a sincere regard for Grant Atherwald.”

“It may be pretense.”



“She wasn’t pretending the day of the wedding. Atherwald’s disappearance was a great shock to her.”

“Well, even so, she may know a lot more than she’s putting out.”

“I think that myself. She closed up like a clam when I talked about her father.”

The car came to the main road and a short time later entered the town of Corbin. As they stopped for a red light, Penny touched Jerry’s arm.

“Look over there,” she directed. “See those two men standing in front of the drugstore?”

“What about them?”

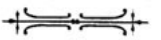
“They’re G men who attended the Kippenberg wedding. Salt pointed them out to me.”

“You don’t say! Maybe we can learn a fact or two from them.”

Jerry parked the car at the curb and sprang out. Penny saw him walk over to the men, introduce himself and show his press credentials. She was too far away to hear the conversation.

In a few minutes Jerry returned to the car looking none too elated.

“You didn’t learn anything, did you?” Penny inquired as they drove on again.



"Not very much. Government men never will talk. But they did admit they were here trying to locate James Kippenberg."

"Then they think he is in the locality."

"They had an idea he would show up at his daughter's wedding. But it didn't turn out that way."

"Did you say anything to them about Grant Atherwald's disappearance?"

"Yes, but they wouldn't discuss it. They said they had nothing to do with the case."

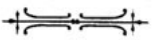
Penny lapsed into reflective silence as the car went on toward Andover. Mentally she sorted over the evidence which she had gathered that day, trying to fit it into a definite pattern.

"Jerry," she said at last. "Yes?"

"You'll probably laugh at this, but I have a theory about Grant Atherwald's disappearance."

"Go ahead, spill it."

"Yesterday when Salt and I were waiting at the drawbridge we saw a motorboat cruise down the river. It was driven by a burly looking fellow who paid no heed when we tried to hail him."



“You’re not suggesting that the man may have had something to do with Atherwald’s disappearance?” Jerry questioned, mildly amused.

“I knew you would laugh.”

“Your theory sounds pretty far-fetched to me, I’ll admit. It happens there are any number of burly, tough looking boatmen on the Kobalt. You can’t arrest a man for a crime just because of his appearance.”

“All the same, there is supporting evidence. Mrs. Latch told me that Atherwald’s note had been handed to her by a boy who in turn received it from someone in a boat.”

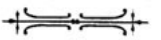
“Boats are rather common too. Your theory is interesting, but that’s all I can say for it.”

“All right,” said Penny. “I was about to tell you another idea of mine. Now I won’t do it.”

No amount of coaxing could induce her to reveal her thought, and the remainder of the drive to Andover was made in silence. It was well after five-thirty when the car finally drew up in front of the City Club.

Penny was not surprised to find the doors locked and no sign of Louise or Miss Frome.

“I thought they would go home without me,” she said to Jerry. “I only wanted to make certain.”



For many miles the road led through pleasant countryside and then swung back toward the Kobalt river. The sun had dropped below the horizon by the time the automobile sped through the town of Claxton.

“Thirty miles still to go,” Jerry sighed. “I’m getting hungry.”

“Two souls with but a single thought,” remarked Penny.

Directly ahead they noticed an electric sign which drew attention to a roadside gasoline station with an adjoining restaurant. Jerry eased on the brake.

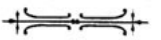
“How about it, Penny? Shall we invest a few nickels?”

“I could do with a sandwich,” Penny agreed. “Several, in fact.”

Not until Jerry had parked the car did they notice the dilapidated condition of the building. It stood perhaps fifty yards back from the main road, its rear porch fronting on the Kobalt.

“Strange how one is always running into the river,” Penny remarked absently. “It seems to twist itself over half the state.”

Jerry had not heard her words. He was gazing at the restaurant with disapproval.



“This place doesn’t look so good, Penny. If you say the word we’ll drive on.”

“Oh, I’d brave anything for a beef barbecue,” she laughed.

Through the screen door they caught a discouraging glimpse of the cafe’s interior—dingy walls, cigarette smoke, a group of rough looking men seated on stools at the counter. Upon the threshold Penny hesitated, losing courage.

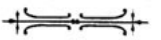
“Let’s not go in,” Jerry grunted in an undertone. “They’ll probably serve cockroaches in the sandwiches.”

Penny half turned away from the door only to stop short. Her attention focused upon two men who were sitting at the far end of the cafe drinking coffee from heavy mugs. In the indistinct light she could not be absolutely sure, yet she was instantly convinced that the heavy-set fellow in shirt sleeves was the same boatman who had been seen near the Kippenberg estate.

To Jerry’s surprise, Penny resisted the tug of his arm as he sought to lead her toward the car.

“This place isn’t half bad,” she said. “Let’s try it and see what happens.”

Boldly she reached for the knob of the screen door and entered the cafe.



CHAPTER 13

TWO MEN AND A BOAT

Penny ignored several empty tables at the front of the dreary restaurant and selected one not far from where the two men sat. As they glanced at her with insolent, appraising eyes, her pulse quickened. She was almost certain that the heavy-set man was the same fellow she had noticed near the Kippenberg estate.

A waiter in a soiled white apron shuffled up to take their order.

"Hot roast beef sandwich and coffee," said Jerry. "With plenty of cream."

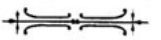
"Make mine the same," added Penny without looking at the menu.

All her attention centered upon the two men who were now talking together in low tones. After the first glance they had taken no interest in her and were unaware of her scrutiny. The heavy-set man bent nearer his companion and with the point of his knife drew a pattern on the tablecloth.

"What do you think of this route, Joe?" he asked.

"Too risky," the other muttered. "Once we start we got to make a quick shoot to the sea."

"Any way we take we might run into trouble. Y'know, I wish we had never agreed to do the job."



“You and me both!”

“Dietz ain’t to be trusted,” the heavy-set man said and his shaggy eyebrows drew together in a scowl. “He’s thinking first and last of his own skin. We’ve got to watch him.”

“And the girl, too. She’s a dumb one and plenty apt to talk if the going gets rough.”

Penny lost the remainder of the conversation as Jerry spoke to her.

“We couldn’t have picked a worse place,” he complained. “Look at all the breakfast egg on the tablecloth. I’m in favor of walking out even now.”

“I’m not,” replied Penny.

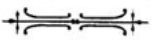
“Say, what’s got into you anyway?” Jerry demanded. “You’re acting mighty funny.”

“Notice those two men at the last table,” she indicated.

“What about them?”

“See that heavy-set fellow with the tattooed anchor on his arm? Well, I’m satisfied he is the same boatman who cruised near the Kippenberg estate yesterday afternoon.”

“It might be,” Jerry agreed, unimpressed. “The Kobalt is only a stone’s throw away. And this place seems to be frequented by rivermen.”



“You didn’t hear what they were saying?” whispered Penny. “Listen!”

Jerry immediately fell silent, centering his attention upon the two men. But by this time they had lowered their voices so that only an occasional word could be distinguished.

“What were they saying anyway?” Jerry asked curiously.

Before Penny could answer, the proprietor came from the kitchen bearing two plates of food which he set down before them. The sandwiches were covered with a dark brown, watery gravy, potatoes bore a heavy coating of grease and the coffee looked weak.

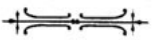
“Anything more?” the man inquired indifferently.

“That’s all,” Jerry replied, with emphasis. “In fact, it’s too much.”

At the adjoining table the two men abruptly hauled to their feet. Paying their bill they quitted the restaurant.

“Let’s leave, too,” suggested Penny. “I should like to see where they go.”

Jerry pushed his plate aside. “Suits me,” he agreed. “Even my cast-iron stomach can’t wrestle with such food as this.”



He paid at the cash register and they went out into the night. Penny looked about for the two men and saw them walking toward the river.

"Hold on," said Jerry as she started to follow. "Tell me what all the excitement is about."

Tersely, Penny repeated the conversation she had overheard.

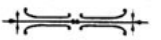
"They're tough looking hombres all right," Jerry admitted. "Likely as not mixed up in some dirty business. But to say they're involved in the Kippenberg affair—"

"Oh, Jerry," Penny broke in impatiently, "we'll never learn anything if we take that attitude. We must run down every possible clue. Please, let's see if they go down to the river."

"We ought to be getting our story back to the office," Jerry reminded her. "If we miss the last edition there will be fireworks."

"It will only take a minute," Penny insisted stubbornly. "If you won't come with me, then I'm going alone!"

She started away and the reporter had no choice but to follow. A narrow, well-trod path led down a steep slope toward the river. Long before they came within sight of it they could hear the croak of bullfrogs and feel the damp, night mists enveloping them like a cloak.



Drawing closer to the two men, Penny and Jerry slackened pace and moved with greater care. But if they hoped to learn anything from the conversation of the pair ahead they were disappointed. The talk concerned only the weather.

Reaching the banks of the river, the two men boarded a sturdy cabin cruiser which had been moored to a sagging dock.

"It's the very same boat," Penny whispered jubilantly. "I knew I wasn't mistaken."

"Even so, what does that prove?" demanded Jerry. "It's no crime to run a motorboat near the Kippenberg estate. The river is free."

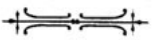
"But you must admit there is other evidence. Oh, why can't we follow them? We might learn something really important."

"We're not going off on any wild chase tonight," stated Jerry sternly. "Come on, it's home for us before your father sends a police squad to search for his missing daughter."

"You're losing a golden opportunity, Jerry Livingston."

"Listen, by the time we located a boat those men would be ten miles from here. They're leaving now. Use your head."

"Oh, all right," Penny gave in. "We'll go home, but I'll bet a cent you'll be sorry later on."



She waited until the cruiser was lost to view in the darkness and then allowed the reporter to guide her back up the steep path.

“At least let’s try to find out who the men are,” Penny urged as they came near the cafe. “The restaurant owner might know.”

More to please her than for any other reason, Jerry said that he would inquire. He re-entered the cafe, returning in a few minutes to report that the proprietor had never seen either of the men before.

“And now let’s be traveling,” he urged. “We’ve killed enough time here.”

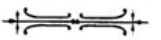
During the remainder of the ride back to Riverview, Penny had little to say. But long after she knew Jerry had forgotten the two boatmen she kept turning their conversation over in her mind. She only wished she might prove that her theories were not ridiculous.

Presently, the automobile drew up in front of the Parker residence.

“Won’t you come in, Jerry?” Penny invited. “Dad may wish to talk with you about the case.”

“I might stop a minute. I have a question or two to ask him.”

The door of the house swung open as Penny and the reporter crossed the front porch. Anthony



Parker stood framed in the bright electric light, a tall, imposing figure.

"That you, Penny?"

"Yes, Dad."

"I'm glad you're home safe," he said, not trying to hide his relief. "Mrs. Weems and I have both been worried. It's going on nine o'clock."

"So late? Didn't Louise telephone you?"

"Yes, she said you had gone on to the Kippenberg estate. Knowing you, I worried all the more. What mischief did you get into this time, Penny?"

"None. Jerry took care of that!"

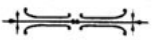
Mr. Parker held the door open for his daughter and Jerry to pass through. "Have you had your dinners?" he asked.

"We stopped at a roadside cafe, Dad. But the food was horrible. We didn't even try to eat it."

"Mrs. Weems can find something for you, I'm sure. She's upstairs."

"Don't call her just yet," said Penny. "First, we want to tell you what we've learned."

Mr. Parker listened attentively as Penny gave a detailed account of her visit to the estate, the finding of the silk hat, and finally of her encounter with the two boatmen at the river cafe.



"I might have learned a lot more if only Jerry hadn't played grandmother," she said crossly. "He refused to follow the boat down the river—said it would only be a wild chase."

"Jerry, I'm glad you had will power enough to overrule her," declared Mr. Parker. "The possibility of those men being connected with the Atherwald case seems very vague to me."

"Dad, you should have heard what they were saying! The one man drew a design on the tablecloth and asked his companion what he thought of the route. They talked about a quick get-away to the sea."

"The men may have been fugitives," Mr. Parker commented. "But even that isn't very likely."

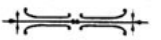
"They spoke of being uneasy about a certain job they had agreed to do," Penny went on earnestly. "They mentioned a girl and said that a fellow named Dietz would bear watching."

Mr. Parker leaned forward in his chair. "Dietz?" he questioned. "Are you certain that was the name?"

"Yes, I heard it clearly."

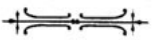
"I don't see how there could be any connection," Mr. Parker mused. "And yet—"

"Where did you hear the name before, Dad?" Penny asked, all eagerness.



“Well, DeWitt has been digging up all the facts he can about James Kippenberg. As it happens, the man once had a business associate named Aaron Dietz who was dismissed because of alleged dishonesty.”

“Then there must be a relationship!” Penny cried. She whirled triumphantly to face the crestfallen reporter. “You see, Mr. Jerry Livingston, my theory wasn’t so crazy after all! Now aren’t you sorry?”



CHAPTER 14

THE STONE TOWER

Louise Sidell was washing the breakfast dishes when Penny walked boldly in at the back door.

"Don't you ever answer doorbells, Lou?" she demanded. "I stood around front for half an hour, ringing and ringing."

"Why, hello, Penny. I didn't hear you at all," apologized Louise. "The radio is on too loud. I see you reached home last night."

Penny picked up a towel and began to dry dishes. "Oh, yes, and did I have a day!"

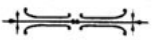
"What happened after you left Andover?"

"It's a long story, so I'll begin at the end. Last night, coming home with Jerry we stopped at a cafe along the river. Guess whom we saw!"

"Knowing your luck, I'd say Charlie Chaplin, or maybe the Queen of England."

"This particular cafe wasn't quite their speed, Lou. Jerry and I saw that same boatman I told you about!"

"The fellow you saw cruising about the Kippenberg estate? What's so remarkable about that?"



"It just happens I've dug up other evidence to show he may know something about Grant Atherwald's disappearance," Penny revealed proudly. "Jerry and I overheard a conversation. It seems this man and a companion of his are mixed up with another fellow named Aaron Dietz."

"Which doesn't make sense to me," complained Louise, scrubbing hard at a sticky plate.

"Aaron Dietz was a former associate of James Kippenberg. Dad said he probably knew more about the Kippenberg financial affairs than any other person. Oh, I tell you, Jerry feels pretty sick because we didn't follow the men last night! Dad assigned him to try to pick up the trail today. He's chartered a motor boat and will patrol the river."

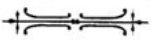
"If you don't mind," said Louise patiently, "I'd like to hear the first part of the story now. Then I might know what this is all about."

Talking as fast as she could, Penny related everything which had happened since she had taken leave of her chum at Andover.

"Which brings me to the point of my visit," she ended her tale. "How about going out there with me this morning?"

"To the Kippenberg estate?" Louise asked eagerly.

"Yes, we may not be able to get across the river, but I mean to try."



"You know I'm wild to visit the place, Penny!" "How soon can you start?"

"Just as soon as these stupid dishes are done. And I ought to change my dress."

"Wear something dark which won't attract attention in the bushes," advised Penny. "Now get to working on yourself while I finish the dishes."

Louise dropped the dishcloth and hurried upstairs. When she returned ten minutes later, her chum was swishing the last of the soapsuds down the sink drain. Another five minutes and they were in Penny's battered car, speeding toward Corbin.

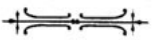
The sun rode high in the sky by the time they came within view of the drawbridge. Noticing that a press car from a rival newspaper was parked at the end of the road, Penny drew up some distance away. She could see two reporters talking with the old watchman.

"Evidently, they're having no luck in getting over to the estate," she remarked.

"Then what about us?"

"Oh, we have our own private taxi service," Penny chuckled. "At least I hope so."

Taking a circuitous route so they would not be noticed by the bridgeman, the girls went down to the river's edge. Far up the stream Penny saw the familiar rowboat drifting with the current. At her



signal the small boy seized his oars and rowed toward shore.

“I was here at eight o’clock just as you said,” he declared. “That fellow up there by the bridge offered me a dollar to take him across the river. I turned him down.”

“Good,” approved Penny.

“Do you want to go across the river now?” the boy asked.

“Yes, please.” Penny stepped into the boat and made room for Louise. “Keep close to the bank until we are around the bend. Then I’ll show you where to land.”

“I guess you’re afraid someone will see you,” the boy commented.

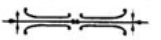
“Not exactly afraid,” corrected Penny. “But this way will be best.”

The boat moved quietly along the high bank, well out of sight of those who stood by the drawbridge.

“The cops were here this morning,” volunteered the boy as he pulled at the oars.

“You saw them visit the estate?” Penny questioned.

“Sure, there were four of ’em. They drove up in a police car and they made old Thorndyke let the bridge down so they could go across.”



“Are the policemen at the estate now?”

“No, they left again in about an hour. What do you suppose they wanted over there?”

“Well, now, I couldn’t guess,” replied Penny. “Like as not they only wished to ask a few questions. Are the Kippenbergs at home?”

“I saw Mrs. Kippenberg drive away right after the police left.”

“And her daughter?”

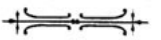
“I guess she must be still there. Anyway, she wasn’t in the car.”

The boat rounded the bend, and Penny pointed out a place on the opposite shore where she wished to land.

“Shall I wait for you?” the boy asked as the girls stepped from the craft.

“Yes, but not here,” directed Penny. “You might row back to the opposite shore and keep watch from there. We ought to be ready to leave within at least an hour.”

The roof top of the Kippenberg house could be seen towering above the tall trees. But as the two girls plunged into the bushes which grew thickly along the shore they lost sight of it entirely.



“I hope,” said Louise uneasily, “that you know where you are going. It would be easy to lose one’s self in this jungle.”

“Oh, I have my directions straight. We should come out near the lily pool at any minute.”

“What do you hope to gain by coming here, Penny?” Louise inquired abruptly.

“I thought I would try to talk with Miss Kippenberg again. There’s an important question I forgot to ask her yesterday. Then I wanted to show you the estate, especially the lily pond.”

“Is there anything unusual about it?”

“I’ll let you be the judge,” Penny answered. “We’re almost there now.”

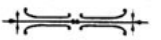
They came in a moment to a path which made walking much easier. Penny went in advance of her chum. Suddenly she halted.

“See what is ahead, Lou! I never saw that thing before.”

She stepped to one side so that Louise might see the tall stone tower which loomed up against a background of scarlet maples.

“How curious!” murmured Louise.

“This isn’t the only queer thing I’ve found on the estate.”



“What purpose could the tower have?” speculated Louise.

“Decoration, perhaps,” replied Penny, moving forward again. “Or it might have been built for a prison.”

“Listen, you have too many different theories about Grant Atherwald,” laughed Louise. “Why don’t you get one and stick to it?”

“My mind is always open to new possibilities and impressions.”

“I’ll say it is,” agreed Louise. “I suppose you think Mrs. Kippenberg is keeping young Atherwald a prisoner in yonder tower?”

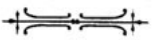
“Well, no, but you must admit it would make a lovely one. So romantic.”

“Are you trying to kid me?” Louise demanded.

Penny smiled broadly as she stared up at the tower which rose perhaps twelve feet. Like every other building on the estate it had been built to resist the ages. High above her head a circular window had been cut in the wall and there was a heavy oaken door.

Reaching for the knob, Penny turned it. Then she pressed her shoulder against the door and pushed with her entire strength.

“Locked!” she announced.



“Then we won’t learn what is inside after all.”

“Yes, we will,” declared Penny. “You lift me up and I’ll peep in the window.”

“You only weigh a ton,” complained Louise.

She obligingly raised Penny up as high as she could.

“Look fast,” she panted. “What do you see?”

“Not much of anything.”

“I can’t hold you forever,” Louise said, and released her hold. “Didn’t you see anything at all?”

“Just a lot of machinery.” “Tools, you mean?”

“No, an electric motor and something which looked like it might be a pump. Oh, I get it now!”

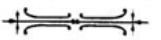
“Get what?” demanded Louise.

“Why, the idea of this tower. It must be used as a pump house. I wondered how the lily pool was ever drained and this must be the answer.”

“You didn’t see any prisoners chained inside?” Louise teased.

“Not one. Well, let’s be getting on to the lily pond. It must be somewhere close.”

Louise could not understand why her chum was so determined that she should see the pool. But since Penny seldom did anything without a purpose, she



speculated upon what might be in store. She knew from the girl's manner that certain facts had been withheld deliberately to make this visit the more impressive.

"Here we are," said Penny as they came to the clearing. "What do you think of it?"

Louise was aware of a deep sense of disappointment as she gazed at the lily pool.

"I really don't see anything so remarkable about it, Penny."

"This was the place where I found the wedding ring. And there were footprints indicating that a struggle probably took place."

"I read all that in the paper," Louise said. "From the hints you've been passing out, I thought you brought me here to show me something mysterious."

"Go close to the pool."

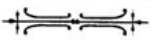
"What for, Penny? You want to push me in?"

"Oh, you're too suspicious! Go on and look."

Louise went to the edge of the pool and peered down into the water.

"I don't see anything."

"You will in just a minute. Keep looking."



Louise was more than half convinced that Penny meant to play some prank, but she dropped down on her knees so her eyes would be closer to the water.

“Why, I do see some large object on the floor of the tank!” she exclaimed after a moment. “What is it, Penny?”

“An alligator.”

Louise gave a smothered scream and drew back from the pool’s edge.

“I—I might have fallen in. You ought to be ashamed of yourself!”

“I only wanted you to get a nice thrill,” Penny grinned. “Pretty fellow, isn’t he?”

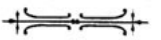
“I didn’t really see him,” Louise admitted.

Overcoming her fear, she again leaned over the edge of the pool but with great caution. This time she could make out the alligator’s form distinctly.

“Horrible!” she shuddered. “I wish you hadn’t brought me—”

Her words ended in a little wail as a tiny object splashed into the water directly beneath her.

“My cameo pin!” she cried. “Oh, Penny, it slipped from my dress and now it’s gone!”



CHAPTER 15

A CAMEO PIN

In dismay, the two girls watched the trinket settle slowly to the bottom of the pool.

"Oh, my beautiful pin," moaned Louise. "Aunt Lucinda gave it to me for my birthday. I wouldn't have lost it for anything in the world."

"I guess it was my fault," Penny said self-accusingly.

"No, it wasn't. I must have been careless about fastening the clasp. When I leaned over it slipped off. Well, it's gone, and that's that."

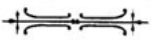
The cameo pin had fallen into the deepest part of the pool not far from where the alligator lay. The girls were unable to see it plainly because of the lily pads and plants which cluttered the water.

"If that old alligator would just behave himself we could wade in and get it easy," Penny said.

"Fancy trying it!"

"I'm afraid he would take special delight in snapping off an arm or a leg. And we don't dare ask anyone to help us get the pin or we'll be ejected from the grounds as trespassers."

"We may as well forget about it, Penny. Come along, I'm sick of this place."



“No, wait, Louise. We might be able to fish it out with a stick.”

“I don’t think we’d have a chance.”

“Anyway, it will do no harm to try.”

Penny searched the woods until she found a long stick with a curve at the end. Lying flat on the flagstones at the edge of the pool she prodded for the pin.

“I can touch it all right!” she cried. “I’ll pull it over to the side.”

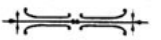
“Be careful you don’t tumble in,” Louise warned, anxiously holding her chum by the waist. “If you should lose your balance—”

Penny hooked the cameo pin in the curve of the stick and began raising it inch by inch up the side of the pool.

“If I can get it up high enough reach down and snatch it,” Penny advised her chum. “Oh, shoot, there it goes!”

The pin had slipped away from the stick and settled once more on the bottom of the pool.

“You can’t get it, Penny,” Louise insisted. “You’re making the alligator all excited by prodding around.”



“I don’t care about him. I’ll try once more if I can locate the pin. It seems to be hiding from me now.”

The water was so disturbed that Penny could not see the pin or the bottom of the pool. She waited several minutes for the dirt to settle and then gazed down once more.

“There it is!” she exclaimed. “It moved over quite a ways to the right.”

Louise flattened herself beside Penny. “Oh, let the pin go,” she said.

“No, I think I can get it. Say, there seems to be something else on the bottom of the pool.”

“Where?”

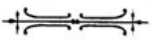
Penny pointed, and then, as her chum still could not distinguish anything, parted the lily pads with her stick.

“Yes, I do see something now,” Louise declared. “What can it be?”

“Doesn’t it look like a metal ring?” Penny asked. She had lost all interest in the cameo pin.

“Yes, it does. Someone probably threw it into the pool.”

“But it looks to me as if it’s attached to the bottom of the tank, embedded in the cement,” Penny said. She bent closer to the water, trying to see.



“Be careful,” Louise warned nervously. “That alligator might come up and snap off your nose.”

Penny paid no heed.

“It is attached!” she announced in an excited voice. “Louise, do you know what I think?”

“What?”

“It’s the ring of a trapdoor!”

“A trapdoor!” Louise echoed incredulously. “You can see for yourself that it’s an iron ring.”

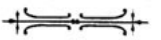
“It does look a little like one from here,” Louise admitted. “But whoever heard of a trapdoor in a lily pool? No one but you would even think of such a thing. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Does anything on this estate make sense?”

“The ring might have something to do with draining the pool,” Louise said without replying to her chum’s question. “I suppose a section of the pool could be lifted up and removed. But I’d never call it a trapdoor.”

“I wish we could tell for sure what it is.” Penny tried to prod the ring with her stick but it was well beyond her reach. “Maybe the alligator has a room down under the pool where he spends his winters!”

“You’re simply filled with ideas today,” Louise declared. “What about my pin? Shall we let it go?”



Reminded of her original task, Penny set to work once more, trying to draw the cameo to the edge of the tank. She was so deeply engrossed, that she jumped as her chum touched her on the arm.

“Listen, Penny, I think someone is coming!”

From the path at the right they could hear approaching footsteps and the low murmur of voices.

Penny struggled to her feet, dropping the stick.

“We mustn’t be caught here,” she whispered.

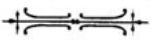
Taking Louise’s hand, she drew the girl into the dense bushes directly behind the pool. Scarcely had they secreted themselves when Sylvia Kippenberg and the head gardener came into view. They seated themselves on a rustic bench not far from where the two girls stood.

“I had to talk with you,” Sylvia said to the old man. “The police came this morning and asked so many questions. Mother put them off but they’ll be back again.”

“They didn’t learn about the alligator?” the gardener asked gruffly.

“No, they came here but only stayed a few minutes. I don’t think they noticed anything wrong.”

“Then that’s all right.”



“Their investigation is only beginning,” Sylvia said nervously. “Mother and I both believe it would be wise to get rid of the alligator.”

“Wise but not easy,” the gardener replied.

“You’ll see what you can do about it?”

“Yes. I’ll try to get rid of him.”

“Then I guess that’s all,” Sylvia said, but she made no move to leave. She sat staring moodily at the pool.

“Anything else on your mind?” asked the gardener.

“I—I wanted to ask you something, but I scarcely know how.”

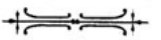
The gardener waited, watching the girl’s face intently.

“You never liked Grant Atherwald,” she began nervously.

“Say, what are you driving at?” the man asked quickly. “You’re not trying to hint that I had anything to do with Grant Atherwald’s disappearance?”

The two faced each other and Sylvia’s gaze was the first to fall.

“No, no, of course not,” she said.



“I don’t know any more about his disappearance than you do,” the man told her angrily. “I didn’t even see him on the day of the wedding.”

“But he came here. The wedding ring was found near the pool. Surely you must have heard some sound for I know you were in this part of the garden.”

“Well, I didn’t,” the man said sullenly. “The only persons I saw were a newspaper photographer and a girl.”

“Please don’t take offense,” Miss Kippenberg murmured, getting up from the bench. “I’ve been terribly upset these past few days.”

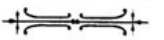
She walked slowly to the edge of the pool. There she stopped short, staring down at an object which lay on the flagstones at her feet. It was the stick which Penny had dropped only a moment before.

“What have you found?” the gardener cried.

He went quickly to her side and took the damp stick from her hand.

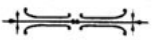
“Someone has been here prying around,” he said in a harsh voice. “This was used to investigate the water in the pool.”

“And whoever it was must be close by even now. Otherwise the stick would have dried out in the sun.”



“You go back to the house,” the man commanded. “I’ll look around.”

In their hideout amid the bushes, Penny and Louise gazed at each other with chagrin. No word was spoken for even a whisper might have been heard. With a common desire for escape, they glided with cat-like tread toward the river.



CHAPTER 16

GATHERING CLUES

The girls could hear no movement behind them as they darted down the path. They dared to hope that they had eluded the old gardener.

Then as they came within sight of the river, Louise stumbled over a vine. Although she stifled an outcry the dull thud of her body against the ground seemed actually to reverberate through the forest. A black crow on the lower limb of an oak tree cawed in protest before he flew away.

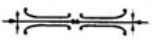
Penny pulled Louise to her feet and they went on as fast as they could, but they knew the sound had betrayed them. Now they could hear the man in pursuit, his heavy shoes pounding on the hard, dry path.

“Run!” Penny commanded.

They reached the river bank and looked about for the boat which would take them across. As they had feared it was on the opposite shore.

Penny gestured frantically, but the boy did not understand the need for haste. He picked up his oars and rowed toward them at a very deliberate pace.

“Oh, he’ll never get here in time,” Louise murmured fearfully. “Shall we hide?”



“That’s all we can do.”

They realized then that they had waited too long. Before they could dodge into the deeper thicket the gardener reached the clearing.

“So it’s you again!” he cried wrathfully, glaring at Penny.

“Please, we didn’t mean any harm. We can explain —”

“This stick is explanation enough for me!” the man shouted, waving it above his head. “You were trying to find out about the lily pool!”

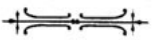
“We were only trying to get a pin which I dropped into the water,” Louise said, backing a step away.

“I don’t believe you!” the man snapped. “You can’t fool me! I know why you came here, and you’ll pay for your folly! You’ll never take the secret away with you!”

With a swift, animal-like spring which belied his age, the gardener hurled himself toward the girls. He seized Penny’s arm giving it a cruel twist.

“You’re coming along with me,” he announced harshly.

“Let me go!” Penny cried, trying to free herself.



"You're going with me to the house. You've been altogether too prying. Now you'll take your punishment, both of you."

The gardener might have managed Penny alone, but he was no match for two athletic girls. As he tried to seize Louise, Penny twisted free.

Quick as a flash, she grasped the man's felt hat, jamming it down on his head over his eyes. While he was trying to pull it off, Louise also wriggled from his grasp.

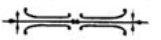
The two girls ran to the water's edge. Their boat had drawn close to shore. Without waiting for it to beach they waded out over their shoetops and climbed aboard.

"Don't either of you ever come here again!" the gardener hurled after them. "If you do—"

The rest of the threat was carried away by the wind. However, Penny could not resist waving her hand and calling back: "Bye, bye, old timer! We'll be seeing you!"

"What's the matter with that man anyhow?" asked the boy who rowed the boat. "Didn't he want you on the estate?"

"On the contrary, he invited us to remain and we declined," grinned Penny. "Just temperament, that's all. He can't make up his mind which way he would like to have it."



Allowing the boy to puzzle over the remark, she busied herself pouring water from her sodden shoes. The visit to the estate had not turned out at all as she had planned. She had failed to talk with Miss Kippenberg, and it was almost certain that from now on servants would keep a much closer watch for intruders.

The only vital information she had gleaned resulted from overhearing the conversation between Sylvia Kippenberg and the gardener.

“She talked with him as if they were well acquainted,” mused Penny. “Miss Kippenberg must have thought he knew more about Grant Atherwald’s disappearance than he would tell. And she seems to be afraid the Law will ask too many questions. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have suggested getting rid of the alligator.”

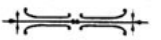
One additional observation Penny had made, but she decided not to speak of it until she and Louise were alone.

The boat reached shore and the two girls stepped out on the muddy bank.

“Will you need me again?” inquired the boy.

“I may,” said Penny, “and I can’t tell you exactly when.

Where do you keep your boat?”



“Up the river just beyond that crooked maple tree. I hide it in the bushes and I keep the oars inside a hollow log close by. You won’t have any trouble finding it.”

Penny and Louise said goodbye to the lad and scrambled up the bank.

“I’m sure I’ll not be going back to that place,” the latter declared emphatically. “I just wonder what would have happened if we hadn’t broken away.”

“We might have been locked up in the stone tower,” Penny laughed. “Then another one of my theories would have proven itself.”

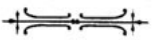
“Oh, you and your theories! You can’t make me believe that gardener didn’t mean to harm us. He was a very sinister character.”

“Sinister is a strong word, Lou. But I’ll agree he’s not any ordinary gardener. Either he’s been hired by the Kippenberg family for a very special purpose or else he’s gained their confidence and means to bend them to his own ends.”

“His own ends! Why, Penny, what do you mean? Have you learned something you haven’t told me?”

“Only this. I’m satisfied Old Peter is no gardener. He’s wearing a disguise.”

“Well, what won’t you think of next! You’ve been reading too many detective stories, Penny Parker.”



“Have I? Then there’s no need to tell you—”

“Yes, there is,” Louise cut in. “Your ideas are pretty imaginative, but I like to hear them anyway.”

“Considerate of you, old thing,” Penny drawled in her best imitation of an English accent. “You don’t deserve to be told after that crack, but I’ll do it anyhow. When I pulled the gardener’s hat down over his eyes, I felt something slip!”

“Maybe it was his skin peeling off.”

“He wore a wig,” Penny said soberly. “That’s why he looked so startled when I jerked the hat.”

“Did you actually see a wig?”

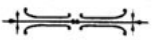
“No, but he must have had one on his head. I felt it give, I tell you.”

“I wouldn’t put anything past that fellow. But if he isn’t a gardener, then who or what is he?”

“I don’t know, but I intend to do some intensive investigation.”

“Just how, may I ask?”

Penny gazed speculatively toward the drawbridge, noting that the old watchman had been deserted by the group of reporters. He sat alone, legs crossed, his camp stool propped against the side of the gearhouse.



“Let’s talk with him, Lou. He might be able to tell us something about the different employees of the estate.”

They walked over to where the old man sat, greeting him with their most pleasant smiles.

“Good morning,” said Penny.

The old man finished lighting his pipe before he deigned to notice them.

“Good morning,” repeated Penny.

“Mornin’,” said the watchman. He looked the two girls over appraisingly and added: “Ain’t you children a long ways off from your Ma’s?”

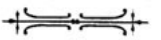
The remark both startled and offended Penny, but instantly she divined that the old fellow’s memory was short and his eyesight poor. He had failed to recognize her in everyday clothes.

“Oh, we’re just out for a hike,” she answered. “You see, we get tired of all the ordinary places, so we thought we would walk by here.”

“We’re interested in your bridge,” added Louise. “We just love bridges.”

“This one ain’t so good any more,” the old man said disparagingly.

“Doesn’t it get lonely here?” ventured Louise. “Sitting here all day long?”



“It did at first, Miss. But I got used to it. Anyway, it beats leanin’ on a shovel for the gov’ment. I got a little garden over yonder a ways. You ought to see my tomatoes. Them Ponderosas is as big as a plate.”

“Do you ever operate the bridge?” Louise inquired, for Penny had not told her that the structure was still in use.

“Oh, sure, Miss. That’s what I’m here for. But it ain’t safe for nothin’ heavier than a passenger car.”

“I’d love to see the bridge lowered.” Louise stared curiously up at the tall cantilevers which pointed skyward. “When will you do it next time, Mr.—?”

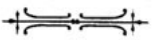
“Davis, if you please, Miss. Thorny Davis they calls me. My real name’s Thorndyke.”

The old man pulled a large, silver watch from his pocket and consulted it.

“In about ten minutes now, Mrs. Kippenberg will be comin’ back from town. Then we’ll make the old hinge bend down agin’.”

“Let’s wait,” said Louise.

Penny nodded and then as Thorny did not seem to object, she peeped into the gear house, the door of which stood half open. A maze of machinery met her eye —an electric motor and several long hand-levers.



Presently Thorny Davis listened intently. Penny thought he looked like an old fox who had picked up the distant baying of the pack.

"That's her car a-comin' now," he said. "I can tell by the sound of the engine. Well, I reckon I might as well let 'er down."

Thorny arose and knocked the ashes from his corn-cob pipe. He opened the door of the gear house and stepped inside.

"May I see how you do it?" asked Penny. "I always was interested in machinery."

"The women will be runnin' locomotives next," Thorny complained whimsically. "All right, come on in."

The old watchman pulled a lever on the starting rheostat of the motor which responded with a sudden jar and then a low purr. It increased its speed as he pushed the lever all the way over.

"Now the power's on. The next thing is to drop 'er."

Thorny grasped one of the long hand-levers and gently eased it forward. There was a grind of gears engaging and the bridge slowly crept down out of the sky.

Penny did not miss a single move. She noted just which levers the watchman pulled and in what order. When the platform of the bridge was on an

even keel she saw him cut off the motor and throw all the gear back into its original position.

“Think you could do ’er by yourself now?” Thorny asked.

“Yes, I believe I could,” Penny answered gravely.

The old watchman smiled as he stepped to the deck of the bridge.

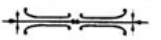
“It ain’t so easy as it looks,” he told her. “Well, here comes the Missuz now and we’re all ready for her. Last time she came along I was weedin’ out my corn patch and was she mad?”

As the black limousine rolled up to the drawbridge Penny turned her face away so that Mrs. Kippenberg would not recognize her. She need have had no uneasiness, for the lady gazed neither to the right nor the left. The car crept forward at a snail’s pace causing the steel structure to shiver and shake as if from an attack of ague.

“Dear me, I think this bridge is positively dangerous,” Louise declared. “I shouldn’t like to drive over it myself.”

As the old watchman again raised the cantilevers, Penny studied his every move.

“For a girl you’re sure mighty interested in machinery,” he remarked.



“Oh, I may grow up to be a bridgeman some day,” Penny said lightly. “I notice you keep the gear house locked part of the time.”

“I have to do it or folks would tamper with the machinery.”

The old man snapped a padlock on the door.

“Now I’m goin’ to mosey down to my garden and do a little hoein’,” he announced. “You girls better run along.”

Thus dismissed, Louise started away, but Penny made no move to leave. She intended to ask a few questions.

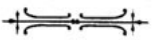
“Thorny, are you any relation to the Kippenberg’s head gardener?” she inquired with startling abruptness.

“Am I any relation to that old walrus?” Thorny fairly shouted. “Am I any relation to him? Say, you tryin’ to insult me?”

“Not at all, but I saw the man this morning, and I fancied I noticed a resemblance. Perhaps you don’t know the one I mean.”

“Sure, I know him all right.” Thorny spat contemptuously. “New man. He acts as know-it-all and bossy as if he owned the whole place.”

“Then you don’t like him?”



“There ain’t no one that has anything to do with him. He’s so good he can’t live like the rest of the servants. Where do you think I seen him the other night?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea. Where?”

“He was at the Colonial Hotel, eatin’ in the main dining room!”

“The Colonial is quite an expensive hotel at Corbin, isn’t it?”

“Best there is. They soak you two bucks just to park your feet under one of their tables. Yep, if you ask me, Mrs. Kippenberg better ask that gardener of hers a few questions!”

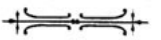
Having delivered himself of this tirade, Thorny became calm again. He shifted his weight and said pointedly: “Well, I got to tend my garden. You girls better run along. Mrs. Kippenberg don’t want nobody hangin’ around the bridge.”

The girls obligingly took leave of him and walked away. But when they were some distance away, Penny glanced back over her shoulder. She saw Thorny down

on his hands and knees in front of the gear house. He was slipping some object under the wide crack of the door.

“The key to the padlock!” she chuckled. “So that was why he wanted us to leave first. We’ll

remember the hiding place, Lou, just in case we ever decide to use the drawbridge."



CHAPTER 17

A SEARCH FOR JERRY

After leaving the Kippenberg estate, Penny and Louise motored to Corbin. More from curiosity than for any other reason they dined at the Colonial Hotel, finding the establishment as luxurious as the old watchman had intimated. A full hour and a half was required to eat the fine dinner which was served.

"Our friend, the gardener, does have excellent taste in food," remarked Louise. "What puzzles me is where does he get the money to pay for all this?"

"The obvious answer is that he's not a gardener." "Maybe he has rooms here too, Penny."

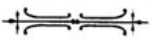
"I've been wondering about it. I mean to investigate."

Louise glanced at her wristwatch. "Do you think we should take the time?" she asked. "It will be late afternoon now before we reach home."

"Oh, it won't take a minute to inquire at the desk."

Leaving the dining room, the girls made their way to the lobby. When the desk clerk had a free moment Penny asked him if anyone by the name of Peter Henderson had taken rooms at the hotel.

"No one here by that name," the man told her. "Wait, I'll look to be sure."



He consulted a card filing system which served as a register, and confirmed his first statement.

“The man I mean would be around sixty years of age,” explained Penny. “He works as a gardener at the Kippenberg estate.”

“Perhaps you have come to the wrong hotel,” said the clerk aloofly. “We do not cater to gardeners.”

“Only to people who employ gardeners, I take it.”

“Our rates start at ten dollars a day,” returned the clerk coldly.

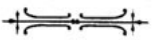
“And does that include free linen and a bath?” Penny asked with pretended awe.

“Certainly. All of our rooms have private baths.”

“How wonderful,” giggled Penny. “We thought this might be one of those places with a bath on every floor!”

Suddenly comprehending that he was being made an object of sport, the clerk glared at the girls and turned his back.

Penny and Louise went cheerfully to their car, very much pleased with themselves for having deflated such a conceited young man. They drove away, and late afternoon brought them to Riverview, tired and dusty from their long trip.



After dropping her chum off at the Sidell home, Penny rode directly to the newspaper office. Finding no parking place available on the street, she ran her car into the loading area at the rear of the building, nosing into a narrow space which had just been vacated by a paper- laden truck.

“Hey, you lady,” shouted an employee. “You can’t park that scrap iron here. Another paper truck will be along in a minute.”

Penny switched off the engine.

“I guess you’re new around here,” she said, climbing out. “The next truck isn’t due until five-twenty-three.”

“Say, who do you think you are, tellin’ me—?”

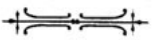
The employee trailed off into silence as another workman gave him a sharp nudge in the ribs.

“Pipe down,” he was warned. “If the boss’ daughter wants to park her jitney in the paper chute it’s okay, see?”

“Sure, I get it,” the other mumbled.

Penny grinned broadly as she crossed the loading area.

“After this, you might mention my automobile in a more respectful tone,” she tossed over her shoulder. “It’s not scrap iron or a jitney either!”



Riding up the freight elevator, Penny passed a few remarks with the smiling operator and stepped off at the editorial floor. She noticed as she went through the news room that Jerry Livingston's desk was vacant. And because the waste basket was empty, the floor beside it free from paper wads, she knew he had written no story that day.

Penny tapped lightly on the closed door of her father's private office and went in.

"Hello," he said, glancing up. "Just get back from Corbin?"

"Yes, Louise and I had plenty of excitement, but I didn't dig up any facts you'll dare print in the paper."

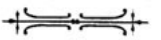
"Did you meet Jerry anywhere?"

"Why, no, Dad."

"The young cub is taking a vacation at my expense, running up a big motorboat bill! He should have been back here three hours ago."

"Oh, be reasonable, Dad," said Penny teasingly. "You can't expect him to trace down those men just in a minute."

"It was a wild chase anyway," the editor growled. "I let him do it more to please you than for any other reason. But that's beside the point. He was told to be back here by four o'clock at the latest, even if he had nothing to report."



“Jerry is usually punctual, Dad. But I suppose being on the river he couldn’t get here just when he expected.”

“He’s probably gone fishing,” Mr. Parker declared.

He slammed down the roll top on his desk and picked up his hat.

“Will you ride home with me?” Penny invited. “Leaping Lena would be highly honored.”

“It’s a mighty sight more comfortable on the bus,” her father replied. “But then, I can stand a jolting.”

As they went out through the main room he paused to speak with DeWitt, leaving an order that he was to be called at his home as soon as Jerry Livingston returned.

Mr. Parker raised his eyebrows as he saw where Penny had left the car.

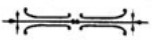
“Haven’t I told you that the trucks need this space to load and unload?” he asked patiently. “There is a ten cent parking lot across the street.”

“But Dad, I haven’t ten cents to spare. The truth is, I spent almost every bit of my allowance today over at Corbin.”

“NO!” said Mr. Parker firmly. “NO!”

“No what?”

“Not a penny will you get ahead of time.”



“You misjudge me, Dad. I had no intention of even mentioning such a painful subject.”

They drove in silence for a few blocks and then Penny indicated the gasoline gauge on the dashboard.

“Why, it’s nearly empty!” she exclaimed. “We won’t have enough to reach home!”

“Well, get some,” said Mr. Parker automatically. “We don’t want to stall on the street.”

A flip of the steering wheel brought the car to a standstill in front of a gasoline pump.

“Fill it up,” ordered Penny.

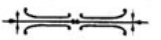
While Mr. Parker read his newspaper, the attendant polished the windshield and checked the oil, finding it low. At a nod from Penny he added two quarts.

“That will be exactly two fifty-eight.”

Penny repeated the figure in a louder tone, giving her father a nudge. “Wake up, Dad. Two fifty-eight.”

Absently, Mr. Parker reached for his wallet. Not until the attendant brought the change did it dawn upon him that Penny had scored once more.

“Tricked again,” he groaned.



"Why, it was your own suggestion that we stop for gasoline," Penny reminded him. "I shouldn't have minded taking a chance myself. You see, the gauge is usually at least a gallon off."

"Anyway, I would rather pay for it than have you siphon it out of my car."

"Thanks for the present," laughed Penny.

Dinner was waiting by the time they reached home. Afterwards, Penny helped Mrs. Weems with the dishes while her father mowed the lawn. Hearing the telephone ring he came to the kitchen door.

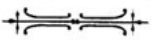
"Was that a call for me?" he asked. "No, Dad, it was for Mrs. Weems."

"Strange DeWitt doesn't call," Mr. Parker said. "I believe I'll telephone him."

After Mrs. Weems had finished with the phone he called the newspaper office only to be told that Jerry Livingston had not put in an appearance.

"At least he might have communicated with the office," Mr. Parker said as he hung up the receiver.

He went back to lawn mowing but paused now and then to stare moodily toward the Kobalt river which wound through the valley far below the terrace. Penny finished drying the dishes and went outside to join him.



“You’re worried about Jerry, aren’t you?” she asked after a moment.

“Not exactly,” he replied. “But he should have been back long ago.”

“He never would have stayed away without good reason. We both know Jerry isn’t like that.”

“No, he’s either run into a big story, or he’s in trouble. When I sent him away this morning, I didn’t look upon the assignment as a particularly dangerous one.”

“And yet if he met those two seamen anything could have happened. They were tough customers, Dad.”

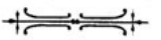
“I could notify the police if Jerry isn’t back within an hour or two,” Mr. Parker said slowly. “Still, I hate to do it.”

“Where did Jerry rent his boat, Dad?”

“I told him to get one at Griffith’s dock at twenty-third street.”

“Then why don’t we go there?” suggested Penny. “If he hasn’t come in we might rent a boat of our own and start a search.”

Mr. Parker debated and then nodded. “Bring a heavy coat,” he told her. “It may be cold on the river.”



Penny ran into the house after the garments and also took a flashlight from her father's bureau drawer. When she hurried outdoors again her father had backed his own car from the garage and was waiting.

At the twenty-third street dock, Harry Griffith, owner of the boat house, answered their questions frankly. Yes, he told them, Jerry Livingston had rented a motor boat early that morning but had not returned it.

"I been worryin' about that young feller," he admitted, and then with a quick change of tone: "Say, you're not Mr. Parker, are you?"

"Yes, that's my name."

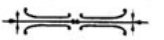
"Then I got a letter here for you. I reckon maybe it explains what became of the young feller."

The boatman took a greasy envelope from his trousers pocket and gave it to the editor.

"Where did you get this, Mr. Griffith?"

"A boy in a rowboat brought it up the river about two hours ago. He said the young feller gave him a dollar to deliver it to a Mr. Parker. But the kid was mixed up on the address, so I just held it here."

"Dad, it must be from Jerry," said Penny eagerly.

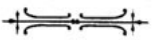


As her father opened the envelope, she held the flashlight close. In an almost illegible scrawl Jerry had written:

"Following up a hot tip. Think I've struck trail of key men. Taking off in boat. Expect to get back by nightfall unless Old Man Trouble catches up with me."

Mr. Parker looked up from the message, his gaze meeting the frightened eyes of his daughter.

"Oh, Dad," she said in a tone barely above a whisper, "it's long after dark now. What do you think has become of Jerry?"



CHAPTER 18

OVER THE DRAWBRIDGE

Wasting no moments in useless conversation, Mr. Parker rented a fast motor boat and prevailed upon Harry Griffith to operate it for him. Guided by the stars and a half moon which was slowly rising over the treetops, the party swung down the river.

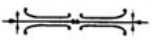
Riding with the current, they came before long to the locality where Penny and Jerry had first sighted the two seamen's cruiser. But now there was no sign of a boat, either large or small.

At a speed which enabled the occupants to scrutinize the shoreline, the searching craft swept on. The river had never seemed more deserted.

"Jerry might have stopped anywhere along here," Mr. Parker observed. "If he drew the boat into the bushes we haven't a chance of finding him."

They went on, coming presently to the Kippenberg estate. As they passed beneath the open drawbridge Penny noted how low it had been swung over the water. A boat with a high cabin could not possibly go through when the cantilevers were down.

Gazing upward, she saw a swinging red light at the entrance to the bridge. A lantern, no doubt, hung there to give warning to any motorist who might venture upon the private road.



“Thorny probably isn’t on duty at this hour,” Penny reflected. “But I should think an open drawbridge might prove more dangerous at night than in the daytime.”

As the bridge was lost to view beyond a bend in the river, she gave all her attention to watching the coves and inlets. Her father sat hunched over in the seat beside her, slapping at mosquitoes. Now and then he would switch on the flashlight to look at his watch.

Gradually the river had widened, so that it was possible to cover only one shore.

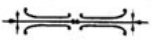
“We’ll search the other side on our return trip,” Mr. Parker said. “But it looks to me as if we’re not going to have any luck.”

As if to add to the discouragement of the party, dark clouds began to edge across the sky. One by one the stars were inked out. Penny’s light coat offered scant protection from the cold wind.

And then, Harry Griffith throttled down the motor an spun the wheel sharply to starboard. He leaned forward, trying to pierce the black void ahead of the boat’s bright beam.

“Looks like something over there,” he said pointing. “Might be a log. No, it’s a boat.”

“I can’t see anyone in it!” Penny cried. “It’s drifting with the current.”



“That looks like one of my boats, sure as you’re born,” Griffith declared, idling the engine. “The same I rented the young feller this morning.”

“But where is Jerry?” cried Penny.

Griffith maneuvered his own boat close to the one which drifted with the current. Mr. Parker was able to reach out and grasp the long rope dangling in the water.

“The flashlight, Penny!” he commanded.

She turned the beam on, and as it focused upon the floor of the boat, drew in her breath sharply. On the bottom, face downward, lay a man.

“It’s Jerry!” Penny cried. “Oh, Dad, he’s—”

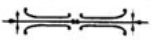
“Steady,” said her father. “Steady.”

While Griffith held the two boats together, he stepped aboard the smaller one. He bent over the crumpled figure, feeling Jerry’s pulse, gently turning him upon his back.

“Is he alive, Dad?”

“His pulse is weak, but I can feel it. Yes, he’s breathing! Hold that light steady, Penny.”

“Dad, there’s blood on his head! I—I can see it trickling down.”



“He’s been struck with a club or some blunt object,” Mr. Parker said grimly. “He may have a fractured skull.”

“Oh, Dad!”

“Keep a grip on yourself,” her father ordered sternly, “It may not be as bad as I think, but we’ll have to rush him to the nearest doctor.”

“If it was me, I wouldn’t try to move him out of there,” advised Harry Griffith. “Leave him where he is. I’ll get aboard and we’ll take this boat in tow.”

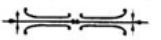
Penny helped the man make their craft fast to the other boat, and then they both climbed aboard. Griffith started the engine and turned around in the river.

“I’ll head for Covert,” he said. “That’s about the closest place. There ought to be a good doctor in a town that size.”

While Griffith handled the boat, Penny and her father did what they could to make Jerry comfortable. They stripped off their coats, using one for a pillow, and the other to cover his body.

“Those two men he was sent to follow must be responsible for this!” Penny murmured. “How could they do such a brutal thing?”

“I’ll notify the police as soon as we touch shore,” her father said grimly. “We’ll search every cove and inlet until we find the ones responsible!”



As he spoke Mr. Parker bent lower to examine the wound on Jerry's head. Blood had nearly stopped flowing and he was hopeful that it came from a flesh wound. He pressed a clean handkerchief against it and the young man stirred.

"How long do you suppose he's been like this, Dad?"

"Hard to tell. An hour, maybe two hours."

Presently, as the boat made full speed up the river, Jerry stirred once more. His lips moved but the words were indistinguishable.

"How far to Covert?" Mr. Parker asked anxiously.

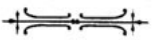
"About four miles from this point," Griffith flung over his shoulder. "It's the next town above the Kippenberg estate. I'm making the best time I can."

Jerry moved restlessly, his hands plucking at the coat which covered him.

"Flaming eyes," he muttered. "Looking at me—looking at me—"

Penny and her father gazed at each other in startled dismay.

"He's completely out of his head," whispered Penny.



“He’s gone back to that other accident which happened last year,” nodded Mr. Parker. “The Vanishing Houseboat affair.”

“Jerry’s had more than his share of bad luck, Dad. Twice now on this same river, he’s met with disaster. And this time he may not come through.”

“I think he will if his skull hasn’t been fractured,” Mr. Parker told her encouragingly. “Listen!”

Jerry’s lips were moving again, and this time his words were more rational.

“Got to get word to the Chief,” they heard him mutter. “Got to get word—”

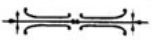
A long while after that Jerry remained perfectly quiet. Suddenly arousing, his eyes opened wide and he struggled to sit up. Mr. Parker gently pressed him back.

“Where am I?” Jerry muttered. “Let me out of here! Let meout!”

“Quiet, Jerry,” soothed Mr. Parker. “You’re with friends.”

The reporter’s tense grip on the editor’s hand relaxed. “That you, Chief?”

“Yes, Jerry. Just lie quiet. We’ll have you to a doctor in a few more minutes.”



“Doctor! I don’t need any doctor,” he protested, trying once more to sit up. “What happened anyway?”

“That’s what we would like to know.”

“Can’t you remember anything, Jerry?” Penny asked. “You went out on the river to try to trace those two men in the cruiser.”

“Oh, it’s coming back to me now. I ran into their boat down by Cranberry Cove. They tied up there.”

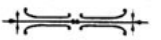
“And then what happened?” Penny demanded, as Jerry paused.

“I saw ’em walk ashore. Thought I would follow so I tied up my boat, too. They started off through the trees. Pretty soon they met a third man, a well dressed fellow, educated too.”

“Did you hear any of their conversation?” Mr. Parker questioned.

“I heard Kippenberg’s name mentioned. That caught my interest so I crept closer. Must have given myself away because that’s about the last I remember. A ton of dynamite seemed to explode in my head. And here I am.”

“Obviously, you were struck from behind with some heavy object,” Mr. Parker said. “They probably dumped you back in your own boat and set it adrift. You never saw your attacker?”



"No."

Jerry rested for a moment, and then as it dawned upon him that he was being speeded to a doctor, he began to protest.

"Say, Chief, I'll be all right. I don't need any doc. Head's clear as a bell now."

"That's fine, Jerry. But you'll see a doctor anyway and have X-rays. We're taking no chances."

"Then at least let me go back to Riverview," Jerry grumbled. "I don't want to be stuck in any hick town hospital."

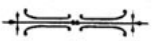
"If you feel equal to the trip, I guess we can grant you that much. You seem to be all right, but I want to make sure. Can't take chances on the paper being sued later on, you know."

"Oh, I get the idea," said Jerry with a grimace. "Thinking of the old cash register, as usual."

Penny drew a deep sigh of relief. If Jerry were able to make jokes he couldn't be seriously injured. She still felt weak from the fright she had received.

"The police will find those men who attacked you," she told him. "I hope they're put in prison for life, too!"

"The police?" Jerry repeated. He stared up into Mr. Parker's face. "Say, Chief, you're not aiming to spill the story, are you?"



"I was."

"But see here, if you notify the police, we'll show our hand to the rival paper. If we keep this dark we could do our own investigating, and maybe land a big scoop."

"Justice is more important than a scoop, Jerry," returned Mr. Parker. "If those men had anything to do with Atherwald's disappearance, and it looks as if they did, then we are duty bound to hand our clues over to the police. By trying to handle it alone, we might let them escape."

"Guess maybe you're right at that," Jerry acknowledged.

As she saw that the reporter was rapidly recovering strength, Penny left him to the care of her father and went forward to speak with Harry Griffith.

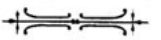
"Where are we now?" she inquired.

"Just comin' to the Kippenberg estate," he told her.

"Only that far? We don't seem to be making very fast time."

"We're buckin' the current, Miss. And there's a right stiff wind blowing."

She had not noticed the wind before or how overcast the sky had become. One could not see many yards in advance of the boat.



Ahead loomed the drawbridge in open position as usual. But Penny could not see the red lantern which she had noticed upon the trip down. Had the light been blown out by the wind?

In any case, it would not greatly matter, she reflected. Few cars traveled the private road. And any person who came that way would likely know about the bridge.

And then, above the steady hum of the motor boat engine, Penny heard another roar which steadily increased in intensity. A car was coming down the road at great speed!

"The lantern must be there," Penny thought. "It's probably hidden by a tree or the high bank. Of course it's there."

She listened with a growing tension. The car was not slowing down. Even Harry Griffith turned his head to gaze toward the entrance ramp of the drawbridge.

It was all over in an instant. A scream of brakes, a loud splintering of the wooden barrier. The speeding automobile struck the side of the steel bridge, spun sideways and careened down the bank to bury itself in the water.

CHAPTER 19

A DARING RESCUE

Those in the motor boat who had witnessed the disaster were too horrified to speak. They could see the top of the car rising above the water into which it had fallen, but there was no sign of the unfortunate driver or other possible occupants.

Penny began to kick off her shoes.

"No!" shouted her father, divining her purpose. "No! It's too dangerous!"

Penny did not heed for she knew that if the persons in the car were to be saved it must be by her efforts. Her father could not swim well and Harry Griffith was needed at the wheel of the motor boat.

Scrambling to the gunwale, the girl dived into the water. She could see nothing. Groping her way to the overturned coupe, she grasped a door handle and turned it. All her strength was required to pull the door open. Her breath was growing short now. She worked faster, with frantic haste.

A hand clutched her own. Before she could protect herself she felt the man upon her, clawing, fighting, trying to climb her shoulders, upward to the blessed air.

His grasp was loose. Penny ducked out of it but held fast to his hand. She braced her feet against

the body of the car and pushed. They both shot upward to the surface.

Griffith and her father lifted the man out of the water into the motor boat.

“Have to go down again,” Penny gasped. “There may be others.”

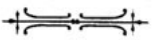
She dived once more, doubling herself into a tight ball, and giving a quick, upthrust of her feet which sent her straight to the bottom. She swam into the car and groped about on the seat and floor. Finding no bodies, she quickly shot to the surface again. Her father pulled her over the side, saying curtly: “Good work, Penny.”

The victim she had saved seemed little the worse for his ducking. With Griffith’s help he had divested himself of his heavy coat and was wringing it out.

Penny had obtained no clear view of the man, nor did she ever, for just at that moment, Jerry raised himself to a sitting position. He stared at the bedraggled one and pointed an accusing finger.

“That’s the fellow!” he cried in an excited voice. “The one I was telling you about—”

The man took one look at Jerry and gazed quickly about. By this time the motor boat had drifted close to shore. Before anyone could make a move to stop him, the man hurled himself overboard. He landed on his feet in shallow water. Splashing through to



the shore, he scuttled up the steep bank and disappeared in the darkness.

“Don’t let him get away!” shouted Jerry. “He’s the same fellow I saw in the woods!”

“You’re certain?” asked Mr. Parker doubtfully.

“Of course! If you think I’m out of my head now, you’re the one who’s crazy! It’s the same fellow! Oh, if I could get out of this boat!”

Griffith brought the craft to shore. “I’ll see if I can overtake him,” he said, “but he’s probably deep in the woods by this time.”

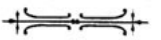
The boatman was a heavy-set man, slow on his feet. Penny and her father were not surprised when he came back twenty minutes later to report he had been unable to pick up the trail.

“The overturned car may offer a clue to his identity,” Mr. Parker said, as they started up the river once more. “The police will be able to check the license plates.”

“I wonder what the man was doing at the estate?” Penny mused.

She groped her way toward the cabin, thinking that she would divest herself of some of her wet garments. Suddenly she stopped short.

“Dad, that fellow took off his coat!” she exclaimed. “He must have left it behind!”



“It’s somewhere on the floor,” Harry Griffith called to her.

Penny found the sodden garment lying almost at her feet. She straightened it out and searched the pockets. Her father moved over to her side.

“Any clues?” he asked.

Penny took out a water-soaked handkerchief, a key ring and a plain white envelope.

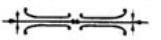
“That may be something!” exclaimed Mr. Parker. “Handle it carefully so it doesn’t tear.”

They carried the articles into the cabin. Mr. Parker turned on the light and took the envelope from his daughter’s hand. They were both elated to see that another paper was contained inside.

Mr. Parker tore off the envelope and flattened the letter on the table beneath the light. The ink had blurred but nearly all of the words could still be made out. There was no heading, merely the initials: “J. J. K.”

“Could that mean James Kippenberg?” Penny asked. The message was brief. Mr. Parker read it aloud.

“Better come through or your fate will be the same as Atherwald’s. We give you twenty-four hours to think it over.”



“How strange!” Penny exclaimed. “That man I pulled out of the water couldn’t have been James Kippenberg!”

“Not likely, Penny. My guess would be that he had been sent here to deliver this warning note. Being unfamiliar with the road, and not knowing about the dangerous drawbridge, he crashed through.”

“But James Kippenberg isn’t supposed to be at the estate,” Penny argued. “It doesn’t make sense at all.”

“This much is clear, Penny. Jerry saw the man talking with the two seamen, and they all appear to be mixed up in Grant Atherwald’s disappearance. We’ll print what we’ve learned, and let the police figure out the rest.”

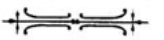
“Dad, this story is developing into something big, isn’t it?”

He nodded as he moved a swinging light bulb slowly over the paper, hastening the drying process.

“After the next issue of the Star is printed, every paper in the state will send their men here. But we’re out ahead, and when the big break comes, we may get that first, too.”

“Oh, Dad, if only we can!”

“Count yourself out of the case from now on, young lady,” he said severely. “You scared the wits out of me tonight, risking your life to save that no-good.

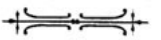


Now shed those wet clothes before you come down with pneumonia."

He tossed her an overcoat, a sweater and a crumpled pair of slacks which Griffith had found under one of the boat seats. Leaving the cabin, he closed the door behind him.

Penny did not change her clothes at once. Instead, she sat down at the table, studying the warning message.

"'Better come through,'" she read aloud. "Does that mean Kippenberg is supposed to pay money? And what fate did Atherwald meet?"



CHAPTER 20

AN IMPORTANT INTERVIEW

Those same questions were pounding through Penny's mind the next morning when she read the first edition of her father's paper. Propped up in bed with pillows, she perused the story as she nibbled at the buttered muffins on her breakfast tray.

"Is there anything else you would like?" Mrs. Weems inquired, hovering near.

"No, I'm quite all right," smiled Penny. "Not even a head cold after my ducking. Have you heard about Jerry?"

"Your father said he was doing fine."

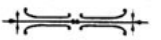
"Did he leave any message for me before going to the office?"

"He said he thought you should stay in bed all day."

"Dad would," Penny pouted. "Well, I feel just fine. I'm getting up right away." She heaved aside the bed clothes.

Then, because she couldn't get the Kippenberg case out of her head, she dressed quickly and went downstairs. She was going out the front door when Mrs. Weems stopped her.

"Now where are you going, Penny?"



Penny's bright eyes twinkled and she flashed the housekeeper an arch, provocative smile.

"Not sure just where I'm going," she replied, her smooth forehead creasing with thought. "But if Dad should get curious, you can tell him he shouldn't be surprised if he finds me visiting with the Kippenbergs."

"Penny! You're not going there again?"

"Why not? I'm after a story for the Riverview Star and I mean to get it. See you later."

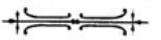
With a wave of her hand Penny walked jauntily off. A few moments later Mrs. Weems heard the clatter of Penny's Leaping Lena careening down the street in the direction of Corbin. First, however, she called for her chum, Louise, who was eager to accompany her on the long ride.

"I won't be able to stay long, Penny," said Louise. "Mother wants me to go shopping with her later this afternoon."

"That's all right," responded Penny as the old car bolted along the road. "If I get delayed, you can take Leaping Lena back home, and I'll follow later on."

With both girls keeping up a steady run of conversation they soon reached their destination.

Penny wondered if she would be able to enter the Kippenberg estate without being challenged by the



bridgeman or a servant. Her anxiety increased upon approaching the river, for she saw that a large group of persons had gathered by the drawbridge.

No one paid the slightest attention to the two girls as they abandoned the car and proceeded to the water's edge. Penny was pleased to find the youthful boatman at his usual haunt on the river. He rowed the girls across to the estate, promising to await their return.

Penny escorted Louise through the trees to the Kippenberg house. Boldly she rang the doorbell which was answered by a butler.

"I should like to speak with Mrs. Kippenberg," she requested.

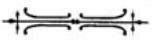
"Madam will see no one," began the man.

Footsteps sounded behind him in the hallway and Mrs. Kippenberg stood in the door.

"So it is you?" she asked in an icy voice. "Julius, see that this person is ejected from the grounds."

"One moment please," interposed Penny. "If I leave now, I warn you that certain facts will be published in the Star, facts which will add to your embarrassment."

"You can print nothing which will humiliate us further."



“No? You might like to have me mention the alligator in your lily pool. And the reason why you and your daughter are so anxious to be rid of it before the police ask questions.”

Mrs. Kippenberg’s plump face flushed a deep red. But for once she managed to keep her temper.

“What do you wish of me?” she asked frigidly.

“First, tell me about that painting, ‘The Drawbridge’ which was presented to your daughter as a wedding gift. Was it not given to her by your husband?”

“I shall not answer your question.”

“Then you prefer that I print my own conclusions?”

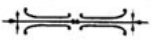
“You are an impudent, prying young woman!” Mrs. Kippenberg stormed. “What if the picture was given to Sylvia by her father! Is that any crime?”

“Certainly not,” said Penny soothingly. “It merely proves that you both know the whereabouts of Mr. Kippenberg.”

“Perhaps I do. But I’ll tell you nothing, absolutely nothing!”

“I have a few questions to ask about your new gardener,” Penny went on, unmoved. “For instance, why does he wear a wig?”

The door slammed in her face.



“That certainly was a very cold reception,” remarked Louise as the girls walked away, the sound of the slamming door still ringing in their ears.

Penny shrugged her shoulders and smiled. “That’s nothing. When you’re a reporter you have to expect those things.” She looked about the deserted estate. “Well, I think I’ll do some more sleuthing in the vicinity of the pool.”

Louise looked at her wristwatch. “Goodness, it’s getting late,” she stated. “I’d like to stay, Penny, but I think I’d better be getting home to meet Mother.”

“Go ahead,” said Penny. “You take Leaping Lena. The boy in the boat will row you across.”

“But how will you get home, then?”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll find a way. You just go on. I only hope the old bus holds up all the way home.”

Louise laughed and then the two girls walked to the boat dock. In a few moments the boy in the rowboat appeared and took Louise across. Afterward, Penny turned back through the trees and went on to the forbidden part of the estate.

She spent a long time about the pool, examining the earth all about it, but she failed to learn anything new. Finally, she retraced her steps to the river. She expected to find the boy waiting for her,

but he had disappeared. She walked through the trees to the boat dock and stood there until the old watchman on the other side observed her predicament.

He obligingly lowered the drawbridge and she crossed the river, pausing at the gear house to chat with him.

Penny listened without comment to his story of the automobile accident. Thorny had his own version of how it had occurred and she did not correct any of the details.

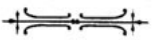
"I wish I had a way to get into Corbin," she remarked when he had finished his lengthy account.

"If you walk down to the main road you kin catch the county bus," he told her. "It runs every hour."

A long hike along a dusty highway, an equally tedious wait at a crossroad, and finally Penny arrived in Corbin. She went directly to the Colonial Hotel, placing a telephone call to her father's office.

"What are you doing in Corbin, Penny?" her father demanded as he recognized her voice.

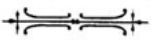
Penny answered him eagerly. "I've made an important discovery which may blow your case higher than a kite. No, I can't tell you anything over the telephone. The reason I am calling is that I may need help. Is Jerry still in the hospital?"



“He never was there,” responded her father. “I couldn’t make him go. He and Salt are out on the river looking for the men who cracked him over the head. I expect they’ll call in any time now.”

“If you do get in touch with Jerry, ask him to meet me at the Colonial Hotel,” urged Penny. “I have a hunch the big story is about to break. In any event I’ll need a ride home.”

There was a great deal more to the conversation, with Mr. Parker delivering a long lecture upon the proper deportment for a daughter. Penny closed her ears, murmuring at regular intervals, “Yes, Dad,” and finally went back to her post in the lobby.



CHAPTER 21

THE WHITE CRUISER

For at least an hour she waited. She watched the clock until the hands pointed to six o'clock. Tantalizing odors came to her from the dining room, but she resolutely downed her hunger. She did not wish to give up her vigil even for a few minutes.

Finally Penny's patience was rewarded. She saw a man moving across the lobby toward the desk. He wore well- cut tailored clothes and a low-brimmed felt hat, yet the girl recognized him at a glance. He was the Kippenberg gardener.

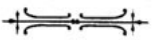
The man paused at the desk and asked for a key.

"Good evening, Mr. Hammil," said the clerk, handing it over.

Penny had noted that the key was taken from a mailbox which bore the number, 381.

"So my friend, the gardener, has an alias," she mused. "Several of them, perhaps."

Another half hour elapsed while the girl waited patiently in her chair. Each time the elevator descended she watched the people alight. At exactly six forty-five Mr. Hammil stepped out of the lift, and without glancing toward the girl, dropped his key on the desk and went into the dining room.



The clerk, busy with several newcomers at the hotel, did not notice. Thinking that she saw her chance, Penny slipped from her chair, sidled toward the desk and picked up the key. Her heart pounded as she walked toward the elevator, but no one called to her. Her action had passed unobserved.

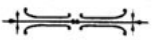
"Third floor," said Penny, and the elevator shot upward.

She located room 381 at the far end of the hall, and with a quick glance in both directions, unlocked the door and entered.

An open suitcase lay upon the luggage rack by the dresser. In systematic fashion Penny went through it, finding an assortment of interesting articles—a revolver, and two wigs, one of gray hair, the other black. There were no letters or papers, nothing to positively identify the owner of the luggage. But in the very bottom of the case Penny came upon a photograph. It was a picture of Sylvia Kippenberg.

Penny slipped the picture into the front of her dress, hastily replaced everything as she had found it, relocked the door, and returned to the lobby. As she went toward the desk intending to rid herself of the key, she stopped short.

Jerry Livingston stood there talking earnestly with the clerk.



“But I was told to come here,” she heard him protest.

“There was a girl in the lobby a few minutes ago,” the clerk replied. “She went off somewhere.”

“No, here I am, Jerry!” Penny cried.

The reporter turned around and his face lighted up.

“Come outside, Jerry,” Penny said before he could speak. “I have a great deal to tell you.”

“And I have some news of my own,” returned the reporter.

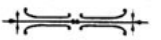
They left the hotel together. Once beyond hearing, Penny made a complete report of her afternoon adventure, and showed Jerry the picture of Sylvia Kippenberg which she had taken from room 381.

“Now for my story,” said Jerry. “I’ve located a place not far from here where those two seamen buy supplies. The owner of the store told me they tie their boat up there nearly every night.”

“Where is Salt now, Jerry?”

“He’s keeping watch at the place. I came into town to telephone the Star office. Your father said I was to stop here and take you in tow.”

“You’re not starting back to Riverview?” Penny asked in dismay.



“I don’t want to, Penny. I have a feeling our big story is just about ready to break!”

“So have I, Jerry. Let’s stay with it. I’ll explain to Dad when we get home.”

“Then let’s be on our way,” the reporter said crisply. “No telling what has developed while I’ve been in town.”

In the press car, the couple took the river road which led east from the Kippenberg estate. As they bounced along, making all possible speed, Jerry told Penny how he and Salt had traced the two seamen. They had made inquiry all along the river, and quite by chance had encountered a fisherman who had given them a valuable tip.

“But so many rumors are false, Jerry,” Penny said.

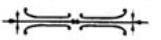
“This tip was straight. Salt and I found the white cruiser tied up at the dock not far from this store I was telling you about. We’ve been watching it for the past two hours, and Salt is still there.”

“Why didn’t you call the police?”

“Wouldn’t have done any good. The men we’re after haven’t been there all day. The only person on board is a girl.”

“A girl?”

“Well, maybe you would say a young woman. About twenty-two, I’d guess.”



“Jerry, you must be watching the wrong boat.”

Jerry shook his head as he drove the car into the bushes at the side of the road. “It’s the right one, I’m sure of it. Well, we’re here.”

Penny was hard pressed to keep up as the reporter led her through the trees down to the winding Kobalt river. They found Salt in his hiding place, behind a large boulder.

“Anything happen since I left?” Jerry demanded.

Salt scarcely noticed Penny’s presence save to give her a quick nod of welcome.

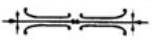
“You got back just in time,” he replied to the question. “The girl went away a minute ago. Took a basket and started for the store.”

“Then why are we waiting?” asked Jerry. “Come on, we’ll take a look inside that boat.”

“Someone ought to stay here and keep watch,” Salt returned. “She may come back any minute.”

“You’re elected guard then. Penny and I will look the boat over and see what we can find. If the girl starts back, whistle.”

Darting across the muddy shore, Penny and Jerry reached the dilapidated boat which had been tied up at the end of a sagging dock. They jumped aboard and after a hasty glance over the deck, dived down into the cabin.



The room was dirty and in great disorder. Boots lay on the floor, discarded garments were scattered about, and a musty odor prevailed.

“Nothing here,” said Jerry.

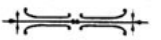
“Let’s look around carefully,” insisted Penny. “We may find something.”

Crossing the cabin she opened a closet door. Save for a pair of oilskins which hung from a nail, it was quite empty.

“Listen!” commanded Penny suddenly.

Jerry stood absolutely still, straining to hear. A long, low whistle reached his ears.

“The warning signal!” he exclaimed. “Come on, Penny, we’re getting out of here.”



CHAPTER 22

TRAPPED IN THE CABIN

Penny opened the door of the cabin only to close it quickly. She and Jerry both had heard men's voices very close to the boat.

"It's too late," she whispered. "Those men have come back."

"Not the girl?"

"No, they're alone. But we're in a trap. What shall we do?"

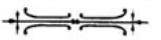
"We could make a dash for it. If we have to fight our way out, Salt will be there to help."

"Let's stick and see what happens, Jerry. We're after information. We must expect to take a chance in order to get it."

Jerry had been thinking more of Penny's safety than his own. But thus urged, he turned the key in the lock, bolting the door from the inside.

A low rumble of voices reached the couple as they stood with ears pressed against the panel. But they were unable to distinguish words. Then presently, one of the seamen moved close to the companionway.

"I'll get it, Jake," he called. "It's down in the cabin."



Jerry and Penny kept quiet as the man turned the door knob. He heaved angrily against the panel with his shoulder.

“Hey, Jake,” he shouted, “what’s the idea of locking the door?”

“I didn’t lock it.”

“Then Flora did.” Muttering under his breath, the seaman tramped back up on deck.

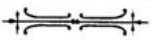
Perhaps ten minutes elapsed before Penny and Jerry heard a feminine voice speaking.

“That must be Flora,” whispered Penny. “What will happen when she tells them that she didn’t lock the door?”

The voices above rose louder and louder until the two prisoners were able to distinguish some of the words. Jake berated the girl as stupid while his companion showered abuse upon her until she broke down and wept.

“I never had the key,” they heard her wail. “I don’t know what became of it. You always blame me for everything that goes wrong, and I’m good and sick of it. If I don’t get better treatment I may tell a few things to the police. How would you like that?”

Jerry and Penny did not hear the response, but they recoiled as a loud crashing sound told them the girl had been given a cruel push into a solid



object. Her cry of pain was drowned out by another noise, the sudden clatter of the motor boat engine.

Penny and Jerry gazed at each other with startled eyes. “We’re moving,” she whispered.

Jerry started to fit the key into the door lock, only to have Penny arrest his hand.

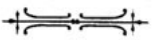
“Let’s stay and see it through,” she urged. “This is our chance to learn the hide-out and perhaps solve the mystery of Atherwald’s disappearance.”

“All right,” the reporter agreed. “But I wish you weren’t in on this.”

From the tiny window of the cabin, he and Penny observed various landmarks as the boat proceeded downstream. Perhaps half an hour elapsed before the cruiser came to the mouth of a narrow river which emptied into the Kobalt. From that point on progress became slow and often the boat was so close to shore that Penny could have reached out and touched overhanging bushes.

“I didn’t know this stream was deep enough for a motor boat,” Jerry whispered. “We must be heading for a hide- out deep in the swamp.”

“I hope Salt has sense enough to call Dad and the police,” Penny said with the first show of nervousness. “We’re going to be a long way from help.”



The boat crept on for perhaps a mile. Then it stopped, and Penny assumed they had reached their destination. Gazing out of the window again, she saw why they were halted. A great tree with finger-like branches had fallen across the river, blocking the way.

"Look, Jerry," she whispered. "We'll not be able to go any farther."

"Guess again," the reporter muttered.

Penny saw then that one of the men had left the boat and was walking along shore. He seemed not in the least disturbed by the great tree and for the first time it dawned upon her that it served a definite purpose.

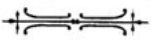
"Lift 'er up, Gus," called the man at the wheel of the boat.

His companion disappeared into the bushes. Several minutes elapsed and then Penny heard a creaking sound as if ropes were moving on a pulley.

"The tree!" whispered Jerry, his eyes flashing. "It's lifting!"

Very slowly, an inch at a time, the great tree raised from the water, its huge roots serving as a hinge. When it was high enough, the motor boat passed beneath the dripping branches and waited on the other side.

Slowly, the tree was lowered into place once more.



“Clever, mighty clever,” Jerry muttered. “Anyone searching for the hide-out would never think of looking beyond this fallen tree. To all purposes nature put it here.”

“Nature probably did,” Penny added. “But our dishonorable friends adapted it to their own use.”

Through the window Penny saw the man called Gus reboard the boat.

Once more the cruiser went on up the narrow stream, making slow but steady progress. Long shadows had settled over the water. Soon it became dark.

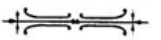
Then a short distance ahead, Jerry and Penny observed a light. As the boat drifted up to a wharf, a man could be seen standing there with a glowing lantern. They were unable to see his face, and quickly dodged back from the cabin window to avoid being noticed.

“Everything all right, Aaron?” the man at the wheel asked, jumping ashore. He looped a coil of rope about one of the dock posts.

“Aaron!” whispered Penny, gripping Jerry’s hand.

“It must be Aaron Dietz, Kippenberg’s former business associate. So he’s the ringleader in this business!”

They listened, trying to hear the man’s reply to the question which had been asked.



"Yeah, everything's all right," he responded gruffly.

"You don't sound any too cheerful about it."

"Atherwald still won't talk. Keeps insisting he doesn't know where the gold is hidden. What bothers me, I am beginning to think we made a mistake. He may be telling the truth."

"Say, this is a fine time to be finding it out!"

"Oh, keep your shirt on, Gus. You and Jake will get your pay anyhow. And even if Atherwald doesn't know the hiding place we'll make Kippenberg come through."

"You'll have to find him first," the other retorted. "If you ask my opinion, you've made a mess of the whole affair."

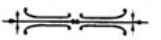
"No one asked your opinion! We'll make Atherwald tell tonight or else—"

The man with the lantern started away from the dock but paused before he had taken many steps.

"Get those supplies up to the shack," he ordered. "Then I want to talk with you both."

"All right," was the reply, "but we have to get the cabin door open first. Flora locked it and lost the key."

"I didn't," the girl protested shrilly. "Don't you try to blame me."



Jerry and Penny knew that their situation now was a precarious one. If they were found in the cabin they would be taken prisoners and the exclusive story which they hoped to write never would be theirs.

“We’ve trapped ourselves in this cubby-hole,” the reporter muttered. “All my doing, too.”

“We can hide in the closet, Jerry. The men may not think to search there.”

Noiselessly, they opened the door and slipped into the tiny room. The air was hot and stuffy, the space too narrow for comfort.

Jerry and Penny did not have long to wait before there came a loud crash against the cabin door. The two seamen were trying to break through the flimsy panel.

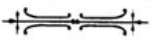
“Bring a light, Flora,” called one of the men.

Penny and Jerry flattened themselves against the closet wall, waiting.

A panel splintered on the outside cabin door, and a heavy tramping of feet told them that the men had entered the room.

“No one in here, Gus.”

“It’s just as we thought. Flora locked the door and lied out of it.”



“I didn’t! I didn’t!” cried the girl. “Someone else must have done it while I was at the store. The door was unlocked when I went away.”

“There’s no one here now.”

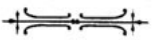
“I—I thought I heard voices while we were coming down the river.”

“In this cabin?”

“Yes, just a low murmur.”

“You imagined it,” the man told her. “But I’ll take a look in the closet to be sure.”

He walked across the cabin toward the hiding place. Penny and Jerry braced themselves for the moment when the door would be flung open. They had trapped themselves and now faced almost certain capture.



CHAPTER 23

AT THE HIDE-OUT

Before the man could pull open the closet door, a booming voice called impatiently from shore: "Say, are you coming? We have plenty of work ahead of us tonight."

Distracted from his purpose, the searcher turned aside without glancing into the closet. With his companion and the girl, he left the cabin.

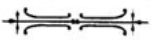
Penny and Jerry waited at least five minutes. When all was silent above, they stole from their hiding place. From the window they assured themselves that the wharf was deserted.

"What do we do now, start after the police?" Penny questioned.

"Let's make certain Atherwald is here first. We can't afford to be wrong."

A path led through the timber. As they followed it, Jerry and Penny saw a moving lantern some distance ahead. They kept it in sight until the three men and Flora disappeared into a cabin.

Stealing on through the darkness, Penny and Jerry crept to the screen door. Peering in, they saw a barren room containing a table, a cook stove and double-deck bunks.



“Get supper on, Flora,” one of the men ordered curtly.

“Am I to cook anything for the prisoner?” she asked in a whining voice.

“Not unless he decides to talk. I’ll find out if he’s changed his mind.”

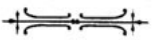
The man who had been called Aaron crossed the cabin to an adjoining room. He unlocked the door which had been fastened with a padlock, and went inside.

“Atherwald must be in there,” whispered Penny.

With one accord, she and Jerry tiptoed across the sagging porch and posted themselves under a high window. Glancing up they saw it contained no glass, but had narrow iron bars in keeping with a prison chamber.

Jerry lifted Penny up so that she could peep into the room. By the light of the oil lantern she saw a haggard young man sitting on the bed. Despite a stubble of beard and unkempt hair, she instantly recognized him as the missing bridegroom. She made another observation, one

which shocked her. The man’s wrists were handcuffed.



"It's Grant Atherwald," she told Jerry as he lowered her to the ground. "They've treated him shamefully."

Jerry held up his hand as a signal for silence. In the room above the men were speaking and he wished to hear every word.

"Well, Atherwald, have you changed your mind? How about a little supper tonight?"

"How can I tell you something I don't know?" the bridegroom retorted wearily. "Kippenberg never confided any of his secrets to me."

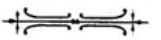
"You know where his gold is hidden!"

"I don't think he ever had any!"

"Oh, yes, he did. When the government passed a law that it was illegal to keep gold, Kippenberg decided to defy it. He had over half his fortune converted into gold which he expected to re-convert into currency at a great profit to himself. His plans went amiss when government men listed him for investigation."

"You seem to know all about his private affairs," Grant Atherwald said sarcastically. "Strange that you haven't learned the hiding place of the gold—if there ever was any!"

"It will do you no good to pretend, Atherwald! Either you tell the hiding place, or we'll bring your bride here to keep you company!"



“You wouldn’t dare touch her, you fiend!”

“No? Well, unless you decide to talk, she’ll share your fate, and I promise you it won’t be a pretty one. Now I’ll leave you to think it over.”

The door closed with a bang.

“We’ll have to get the police here right away,” Jerry advised Penny in a whisper. “No telling what those scoundrels may try to do to Atherwald. We haven’t a moment to waste.”

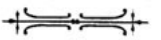
“It would take us hours to bring help here,” reasoned Penny. “And if we try to use the motorboat the gang will be warned and flee while we’re on our way down the river.”

“That’s so, but we have to do something. Any ideas?”

“Yes, I have one,” Penny answered soberly. “It may sound pretty crazy. Still, I really believe it would work!”

Hurriedly, she outlined what she had in mind. Jerry listened incredulously, but as the girl explained and elaborated certain details of her plan, his doubts began to clear away.

“It’s dangerous,” he protested. “And if your hunch about



the pool is wrong, we will be in a fix."

"Of course, but we'll have to take a chance in order to save Atherwald."

"If everything went exactly according to plan it might work!"

"Let's try it, Jerry. Lift me up so I can attract Atherwald's attention."

The reporter did as she requested. Penny tapped lightly on the iron bars with her signet ring. She saw Grant Atherwald start and turn his head. Penny repeated the signal.

The man arose from the bed and stumbled toward the window.

"Who is it?" he whispered hoarsely.

"A friend."

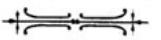
"Can you get me out of here?"

"We're going to try. You are handcuffed?"

"Yes, and my captor keeps the key in his pocket. The room outside is always guarded. Did you bring an implement to saw through the bars?"

"No, we have another scheme in mind. But you must do exactly as we tell you."

"Yes, yes!" the bridegroom whispered eagerly, his pale cheeks flooding with color.



“Listen closely,” Penny instructed. “When your captor comes back tell him you have decided to talk.”

“I know nothing about the cache of gold,” the man protested.

“Tell your captor that the hiding place is on the Kippenberg estate.”

“That would only involve Sylvia and Mrs. Kippenberg. I’ll do nothing to get them into trouble.”

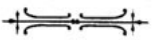
“You’ll have to obey instructions or no one can help you,” Penny said severely. “Would you prefer that those cruel men carry out their threat? They’ll spirit Sylvia away and try to force the truth from her.”

“I’ll do as you say.”

“Then tell your captor that the gold is hidden in a specially constructed vault lying beneath the lily pool.” Penny had resolved to act upon her hunch that there was a trapdoor on the bottom of the pool. Now as she issued instructions she wished that she might have found some way of examining the pool to see if she were right. However, she had to take a chance on there being a vault beneath the pool.

Atherwald protested mildly. “He would never believe such a fantastic story.”

“It is not as fantastic as it sounds,” replied Penny. “You must convince him that it is true.”



"I will try."

"Make the men understand that to get the gold they must drain the pool and raise a trapdoor in the cement bottom. Ask to be taken with the men when they go there tonight and demand that you be given your freedom as soon as the gold is found."

"They will never let me go alive. An identification from me would send them all to prison for life."

"Do you know the men?"

"The ringleader is Aaron Dietz. At one time he was employed by Mr. Kippenberg."

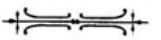
"Just as I thought."

"The other two call themselves Gus and Jake. I don't know their last names. Then there is a girl who seems to be a sister to Gus."

"How did they get you here?"

"On the day of the wedding I was handed a note just as I reached the estate. It requested me to come at once to the garden. While I waited there, two ruffians sprang upon me from behind. Before I could cry out they dragged me to their boat at the river's edge. I was handcuffed, blindfolded and brought to this cabin."

The slamming of an outside door warned Penny that she was wasting precious time in talk.



“You understand your instructions?” she whispered hurriedly.

“Yes.”

“Then goodbye. With luck we’ll have you free in a few hours.”

“With luck is right,” Jerry muttered as Penny slid to the ground.

Aaron Dietz stood on the front porch staring out into the night. Seeing him there, Penny and Jerry circled widely before attempting to return to the river. Satisfied that they had not been observed, they boarded the boat and descended to the cabin.

For possibly an hour they sat in the dark, waiting anxiously.

“Looks as if my little plan didn’t work,” Penny remarked. “I might have known it would be too simple.”

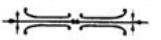
Jerry had risen to his feet. He went to the window and listened.

“Hear anything?” Penny whispered hopefully.

“Sounds like someone coming down the path. We ought to get into our cubby-hole.”

They tiptoed to the closet and closed the door.

Within a few minutes they heard a confusion of voices and the shuffle of feet as men boarded the



cruiser. Penny wondered if the group included Grant Atherwald and was greatly relieved when she heard him speak.

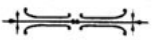
“I don’t see why you think I would double-cross you,” he said distinctly. “I am considering my own welfare. You promised that if the gold is found you’ll give me my freedom.”

“Sure, you’ll get it. But if you’re lying about the hiding place—”

The words were drowned out by the roar of the motor boat engine. Penny and Jerry felt the floor beneath them quiver and then gently roll. The cruiser was under way.

“We’re heading for the Kippenberg estate!” Penny whispered. “Oh, everything is starting out beautifully!”

“I only hope it ends the same way,” said Jerry morosely. “I only hope it does.”



CHAPTER 24

SECRET OF THE LILY POOL

The moon rode high in the heavens as the cabin cruiser let go its anchor in a cove off the Kippenberg estate. Penny who had been dozing for the past hour in her self-imposed prison started up in alarm as Jerry nudged her in the ribs.

"Wake up," he whispered. "We're here."

"At the estate?"

"I think so."

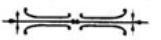
On the deck above their heads they could hear the men talking together.

"You'll come along with us, Atherwald," Aaron Dietz said. "Flora, you stay here and guard the boat. If you see anyone watching or acting suspiciously, blow the whistle two short blasts."

"I don't want to stay here alone," the girl whimpered. "I'm afraid."

"You'll do as I say," the man ordered harshly. "Get started, Gus. It's two o'clock now. We won't have many hours before daylight."

In making her plans Penny had not once considered that the men might leave a guard on the cruiser. With the girl posted as a lookout they were still prisoners in the cabin.



"We have to get out of here now or never," she whispered. "What shall we do about Flora?"

"We'll rush her and take a chance on the whistle."

They slipped out of their hiding place and crawled noiselessly up the steep stairway. Pausing there, they watched the shadowy figure of the girl in the bow of the boat. She was quite alone, for her companions had disappeared into the woods.

"Now!" commanded Jerry in a whisper.

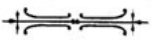
With a quick rush he and Penny were across the deck. They approached Flora from behind and were upon her before she could turn her head. Jerry grasped her arms while Penny clapped a hand over her mouth to prevent a scream. Although the girl fought fiercely, she was no match for two persons.

Stripping off her sash, Penny gave it to Jerry to use as a gag. They bound the girl's wrists and ankles, then carried her down into the cabin.

"I hate to leave her like that," said Penny as they went back on deck.

"Don't waste your sympathy," replied Jerry. "She doesn't deserve it. Anyway, we'll soon set her free. We must bring the police now."

"The nearest house with a telephone is about a half mile away."



"It won't take us long to cover the distance," Jerry said, helping her down from the boat.

"You go alone," urged Penny. "I'll stay here and keep watch."

"I don't like to leave you."

"Go on." Penny gave him a little push. "And hurry!"

After Jerry had reluctantly left, she plunged into the trees, carefully picking her way along the path which led to the lily pool. A short distance brought her to the clearing. Halting, she saw the three men and Grant Atherwald silhouetted in the bright moonlight. The latter was still handcuffed, guarded by Aaron Dietz who allowed his companions to do the hard labor.

Gus and Jake had broken open the door of the stone tower. The soft purr of a motor told Penny that they had started draining the pool. She wondered what the men would do when they discovered that the tank contained a very live alligator.

"It ought to put a crimp in their work," she chuckled. "Mr. Kippenberg couldn't have chosen a more effective guard for his gold."

But gradually as the pool drained lower and lower, it struck Penny as odd that the men did not notice the alligator. Belatedly, it occurred to her that the Kippenberg gardener had probably succeeded in

getting rid of the monster since her visit to the garden earlier in the day.

“Something like that would happen,” she thought. “Oh, well, even so Jerry ought to get here with the police in ample time.”

Only the waning of the moon gave indication of how swiftly the night was passing. Penny became alarmed as she observed how fast the pool emptied. Jerry would not have as long as she had anticipated. But surely, he would bring help before it was too late.

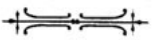
Presently, one of the men shut off the motor in the stone tower, saying with quiet jubilance: “There, she’s empty!”

He jumped down into the tank, and almost at once uttered a cry of discovery.

“Here it is, just as he said! The ring to the trap! Give us some help, Gus.”

With Aaron Dietz and the bewildered bridegroom watching from above, the two men raised the heavy block of cement. Penny drew closer for she did not wish to miss anything. She stood in the shadow of a tree scarcely fifteen yards from where the men worked.

“A stairway leads down into an underground vault!” Jake cried exultantly. “We’ve found the hiding place of the gold.”



“Toss me your flashlight, Aaron,” called Gus. “We’ll soon have all of the treasure out of here.”

The next ten minutes brought a confused whirl of impressions. Penny’s thoughts were in turmoil. Why didn’t Jerry come with the police? As soon as the men carried the burden of gold to the boat they would discover Flora, bound and gagged. Then they would suspect that a trap had been laid. Oh, why didn’t Jerry hurry?

Gus and Jake had descended into the underground vault. As the light reappeared, Penny was dumbfounded to see that the men were empty handed.

“Nothing down there,” Gus reported in disgust. “Nothing!”

“Then we’ve been tricked!” Aaron Dietz turned furiously upon his prisoner. “You’ll pay for this!”

“I thought the gold was here,” answered Grant Atherwald.

“Lock him up in the vault and start the water running,” advised Jake harshly. “It’s a good way to be rid of him.”

The suggestion appealed to Aaron Dietz. At a nod from him, Atherwald was seized and dragged down into the pool. He was shoved into the vault, but before the two men could lower the heavy cement

block into place, a signal from Dietz arrested their action.

"Wait!"

In her anxiety over Grant Atherwald, Penny had moved closer to the pool. Without realizing that she was exposing herself, she stood so that her shadow fell clearly across the open space. Before she comprehended her danger, Dietz hurled himself upon her, seizing her roughly by the arms.

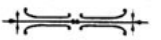
Penny struggled to free herself but could not. The man's grip was like steel.

"So you were spying!" he exclaimed harshly.

"I—I was just watching," Penny stammered. "Don't you remember me? I am the girl who pulled you out of the river when your car went over the drawbridge."

The man looked closely at her, and for an instant she dared hope that he would recall her with gratitude. But his face hardened again and he said unfeelingly: "You know entirely too much, my little girl. This is one story you will never write for your father's paper. Your curiosity has proven your undoing. You share the fate of your very good friend."

With a sinking heart Penny realized by the man's words that he knew her to be the daughter of a



newspaper publisher, and that he had guessed her part in the trick played upon him.

“Down you go!” Dietz said harshly.

As he dragged her toward the pool, Penny screamed at the top of her lungs. A hand was clapped over her mouth. She bit it savagely, but her efforts to free herself were of no avail.

The men shoved her headlong down the stone stairway into the pit.

“Now scream as much as you like,” Aaron Dietz hurled after her. “No one will hear you.”

The heavy stone slab dropped into place.

Penny picked herself up from the steps. Terror gripped her, and with a sob she called frantically: “Mr. Atherwald! Mr. Atherwald!”

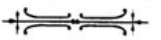
“Here at the bottom of the steps,” he answered with a groan.

“Are you hurt?”

“Only bruised. But my hands are still in cuffs.”

Penny limped down the stairway and helped the man to his feet.

“We’re done for now,” he said. “No one will ever look for us down in this vault. And our cries will never be heard.”



“Don’t give up,” Penny murmured encouragingly. “We may be able to lift the stone. Come let’s try.”

Mounting the stairs, they applied their shoulders to the massive door, but their best efforts did not raise it an inch.

“Listen!” cried Atherwald suddenly.

They both could hear the sound of water running into the empty pool.

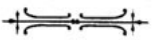
“In an hour’s time no one will ever guess that a hidden vault lies beneath the tank!” Atherwald groaned. “We’re doomed!”

“If we can hear the water splashing above us, our voices might carry!” Penny reasoned. “Let’s cry out for help. Now, together!”

They shouted over and over until their voices failed them. Then, completely discouraged, they sagged down on the stairway to rest.

“Nothing went as I planned,” Penny said dismally. “I really thought the gold was hidden in this vault. If the men had found it, they would have spent hours removing the loot to their boat. Jerry would have come with the police and everything would have been all right.”

Grant Atherwald was not listening to the girl’s words. He struggled to his feet, pressing his ear against the trapdoor.



“The water has stopped running!”

“Are you sure?” Penny sprang up and stood beside him, listening.

“Yes, and I hear voices!”

With one accord, they shouted for help. Could it be imagination or did they hear an answering cry? As they repeated their frantic call, there was a scraping on the stone above their heads.

“Stand away,” ordered a muffled voice.

Before Penny and the bridegroom could obey, the great door lifted. A deluge of water poured in, its force nearly washing them from the steps. But in another moment the passage was clear and they stumbled up through the rectangular opening.

Jerry grasped Penny’s hand, helping her out of the vault. One of the blue-coated policemen aided Atherwald, unfastening the handcuffs which held him a prisoner.

“You’re all right, Penny?” the reporter asked anxiously.

“I—I feel like a drowned rat,” she laughed, shaking water out of her hair. Then, with a quick change of mood she asked: “Did you get Aaron Dietz and his men?”

“No,” Jerry answered in disgust. “When we crossed the river five minutes ago, the cruiser was still

there. No sign of anyone around. I brought the police here, and now I suppose they've made their get-away."

"Oh, Jerry, we can't let them escape! Send the police—"

"Now don't get worked up," the reporter soothed. "A squad started back just as soon as we found out what had happened here."

"Dietz and his men must have seen the police crossing the river," speculated Penny. "They may have hidden in the bushes, biding their time. By now they've slipped away in their boat."

"I'm afraid of it," Jerry admitted. "I traveled as fast as I could."

As one of the policemen lifted Penny out of the pool, a noise which sounded like the back-firing of an automobile, broke the stillness of the night. It was followed by a volley of similar sounds.

"Gunfire!" exclaimed Penny.

The policemen started at a run through the woods toward the place where the white cruiser had last been seen. Penny hesitated, and then took the opposite direction, coming out of the woods at a point directly opposite the drawbridge.

Gazing far up the river she could see the white cruiser, flashes of fire coming from the cabin

window as the desperadoes exchanged shots with the police, who were concealed in the woods.

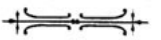
“That boat will try to run for it in another minute,” Penny thought. “If only the drawbridge were down!”

Kicking off her shoes, she dived into the water, swimming diagonally across the river to take advantage of the swift current. Her powerful strokes brought her to shallow water and she waded ashore through ankle- deep mud. As she scrambled up the slippery bank, her wet clothing plastered to her body, she heard the roar of the cruiser’s motor.

“They’ve started the engine!” she thought. “In another minute the boat will be at the bridge. Hurry! Hurry!”

Penny could force herself to no greater effort. Breathless, she reached the gearhouse and groped frantically under the door. Had Thorny failed to hide the key there? No, her fingers seized upon it.

Trembling with excitement, she turned it in the lock. The door of the gearhouse swung open. Now could she remember how to lower the bridge? Any mistake would be costly, for by this time she could hear the cruiser racing down the river at full speed. If only it were light enough so that she could see the gears!



She pulled a lever and her heart leaped as the motor responded with a pleasant purr. The power was on!

"Now to lower the bridge!" thought Penny. "But which lever is the right one? I'm not sure."

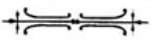
With a prayer in her heart she grasped the one closest at hand and eased it forward. There was a grinding of gears as the tall cantilevers began to move. They were coming down, but oh, so slowly!

"Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!" Penny whispered, as if her words could speed the bridge on its journey.

The white cruiser drove onward at full speed. Lower came the bridge. Penny held her breath, knowing it would be a matter of inches whether or not the boat would clear. The man at the wheel, aware of the danger, did not swerve from his course.

The bridge settled into place. As the crash came, Penny closed her eyes.

"I did it! I've stopped them!" she thought, and sagged weakly against the gear house.



CHAPTER 25

VICTORY FOR PENNY

Minutes later Penny was still leaning limply against the building when a car drove up to the bridge. Her father, Salt, and a bevy of policemen and government representatives sprang out and ran to her side.

"Penny, what happened?" Mr. Parker clasped his daughter in his arms. "You're soaking wet! Didn't we hear gunfire as we turned in here?"

Penny waved her hand weakly toward the river below.

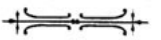
"There's your story, Dad. Pictures galore. Boat smashes into dangerous drawbridge. Police pursue and shoot it out with desperadoes, taking what's left of 'em into custody. I'm afraid to look."

"And what were you doing while all this was going on?" demanded her father.

"Me? I was just waiting for the drawbridge to go down."

Mr. Parker, Salt, and the policemen he had brought to the scene, rushed to the edge of the bridge. A police boat had drawn up beside the badly listing cruiser, and three men prisoners and a girl were being taken off.

"How bad is it?" Penny called anxiously.



“All captured alive,” answered her father. “Salt, get that camera of yours into action! Where’s Jerry? He would be missing at a time like this! What happened anyhow? Can’t someone tell me?”

Penny had fully recovered the power of speech, and with a most flattering audience, she recounted her adventures.

“Excuse me just a minute,” she interrupted herself.

Turning her back, she pulled a sodden photograph from the front of her dress and handed it to her father.

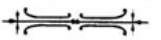
“This picture is in pretty bad shape,” she said, “but it’s clue number one. You see, it’s a photograph of Miss Kippenberg, and on the back is written, ‘To Father, with all my love.’ I found the picture this afternoon in Room 381 at the Colonial Hotel.”

“Then you’ve located Kippenberg?” one of the G men demanded.

“I have. He’s been masquerading as the Kippenberg gardener, coming back here no doubt to witness the marriage of his daughter.”

“We’ll arrest him right away,” said the government man, turning to leave. “Thanks for the tip.”

“I am confident Miss Kippenberg and her mother had nothing to do with Grant Atherwald’s disappearance,” Penny went on. “Aaron Dietz plotted the whole affair himself. I guess he must



have learned about Kippenberg's cache of gold while he worked for the man. He believed that Grant Atherwald shared the secret and could tell where the money was hidden."

"You've located the gold, too, I suppose," Mr. Parker remarked whimsically.

"No, Dad, I slipped up there. I thought the gold was in a secret vault under the alligator pool, but I was wrong. I don't know where it is."

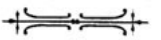
"We'll let the G men solve that mystery when they take Kippenberg into custody," replied her father. "Our work is cut out for us now. We'll find Jerry, talk with young Atherwald, and rout Miss Kippenberg and her mother out of bed for an exclusive interview."

"And this time I am sure they'll answer questions," declared Penny.

During the next hour the "story" was taken entirely from her hands. Jerry, her father and Salt, knew exactly how to gather every fact of interest to the readers of the Star.

Sylvia Kippenberg, overjoyed to find her fiancé alive, posed for pictures with him, and answered all questions save those which concerned her father.

Not until a telephone call came from the Colonial Hotel, saying that Mr. Kippenberg had been taken



into custody, would either Sylvia or her mother admit that the man had posed as the gardener.

"Very well, it is true," Mrs. Kippenberg acknowledged at last. "James has been trying to avoid government men for over a year. Wishing to return for Sylvia's wedding, he disguised himself as a gardener. Then after Grant's disappearance, he remained here trying to help."

"And it was your husband who managed to get rid of the alligator?" Penny interposed.

"Yes, we were afraid police might ask embarrassing questions. James disposed of it to a zoo late yesterday afternoon."

"And the cache of gold under the lily pool," said Mr. Parker. "What became of that?"

"There is no gold."

"None at all?"

"None."

"And there never was any?" questioned Penny incredulously. "Then why was the vault ever built?"

"Tell her the truth, Mother," Sylvia urged. "She deserves to know. Anyway, it can do Father no harm now."

"At one time my husband did have a considerable supply of gold," Mrs. Kippenberg admitted. "Since

he could not trust a bank he constructed his own vault under the pool and placed the alligator there as a precaution against prying persons."

"My father really did nothing so very wrong," Sylvia broke in. "The gold was bought with his own money. If he chose to sell it later at a profit it was his own affair."

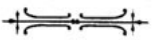
"Not in the opinion of the government," Mr. Parker said with a smile. "He held the gold illegally. So your father disposed of it?"

"Yes, he shipped it out of the country months ago. And no one will ever be able to prove anything against him."

"My husband is a very clever man," added Mrs. Kippenberg proudly.

"That remains to be seen," said Mr. Parker. "I know a number of very clever government men, too."

Later, in dry clothing loaned to her by Miss Kippenberg, Penny motored back to Corbin with her father, Jerry, and Salt. There they learned that the three prisoners had been locked up in jail, while James Kippenberg was being questioned by government operatives. He readily admitted that he had disguised himself as the gardener but defied anyone to prove he ever had disposed of illegal gold.



Mr. Parker did not wait to learn the outcome of the interview. Instead he telephoned the big story to DeWitt and arranged for complete coverage on every new angle of the case. Satisfied that no more could be learned that night, the party sped back toward Riverview.

"Aaron Dietz and his confederates ought to get long prison sentences," Penny remarked as they drove through the night. "But what will happen to Mr. Kippenberg, Dad? Do you think he will escape punishment as his wife believes?"

"He'll get what is coming to him," replied Mr. Parker. "A government man told me tonight that Kippenberg's income tax reports have been falsified. And Kippenberg knew they had evidence against him or he never would have gone into hiding. No, even if it can't be proven that he held gold illegally, he'll certainly be fined and given a year or so in prison for tax evasion."

"I hope he receives a light sentence for Sylvia's sake," said Penny. After a moment she added: "Sylvia and Grant Atherwald are going to be married tomorrow. They told me so."

"There's a fact we missed," declared Jerry. "Penny always is showing us up."

"Oh, I didn't prove myself so brilliant tonight," responded Penny. "When I was down in that vault I decided I was just plain dumb. If you hadn't had sense enough to guess where Grant Atherwald and

I were being held— well, Dad would have had to adopt a new daughter."

"It was easy enough to tell what had happened," said Jerry. "You had told me you thought there was a secret vault beneath the pool. Then, too, I found your handkerchief floating in the bottom. The water had only been running in a few minutes." He fished in his pocket and brought out a pin which he handed to Penny. "I also found this."

"Thanks, Jerry," said Penny. "That's Louise's cameo pin. She dropped it the day we were on the Kippenberg estate together."

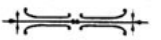
"The police gave you full credit for the capture of those men, Penny," said her father with pride. "You yanked the drawbridge just in time to trap them."

"Salt did his share, too," mentioned Penny generously. "He went for the police just as soon as he realized Jerry and I had been carried away on the cruiser."

"The only trouble was that the cops wasted too much time searching for you down river," the photographer drawled. "We finally went back to Corbin and ran into Mr. Parker who suggested we come to the estate."

"How did you happen to be in Corbin, Dad?" asked

Penny curiously.



“You might know—I was looking for you. Isn’t that my usual occupation?”

“You’re not provoked at me, Dad?”

“No, of course not,” the publisher answered warmly. “You’ve all done fine work tonight. This is the biggest story we’ve run into in over a year! We’ll score a beat on the rival papers.”

“Then don’t you think Jerry and Salt have earned a raise?” suggested Penny.

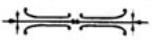
“Yes,” agreed her father absently, “I’ll take care of it tomorrow.”

“And you might tack on another dollar to my allowance, Dad. I’ll also have a small bill to present. There will be several dollars for gasoline, lunches going and coming from Corbin, two ruined dresses, a pair of torn silk stockings, and—”

“That’s enough,” broke in Mr. Parker with a laugh. “If you keep on listing your expenses, I’ll be broke. You turned out to be an expensive reporter.”

“It was worth it, wasn’t it?” Penny demanded, placing her hands on her hips.

Her father agreed heartily. “It certainly was, Penny. The Riverview Star obtained a smashing story to scoop all the other newspapers, and I’ve got my elusive daughter back again safe and sound.”



Penny moved closer to her father. She grasped the lapels of his coat in her slender fingers and tipped her weary but still lovely face toward him.

“Dad, will you promise me one thing?”

“That depends on what you are after,” Mr. Parker told her gravely.

“Whenever the Riverview Star has a baffling mystery to be run down to earth, will you promise to call in your ace sleuth?”

“And who would that be?” demanded Mr. Parker with a puzzled frown. Then as Penny laughed gaily, he also started to grin. “So you are the ace sleuth? I guess I was a little slow in understanding. But you seem to be right. This is the third mystery you’ve solved. Maybe we will use you on the next mystery.”

“Thanks, Dad,” said Penny. “I just hope I won’t have to wait too long for the next mystery to come along.”

THE END

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